赤松中学

緋弾のアリア Ⅶ

Aria the Scarlet Ammo

火と風の円舞（キャスリング・ターン）

MF文庫J

Novel Illustrations

緋弾のアリアVII
Aria the Scarlet Ammo
火と風の円舞
キャスリング・ターン
赤松中学
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緋弾のアリアVII
赤松中学
MEDIA FACTORY
580

【著者】

赤松中学
あかまつ・ちゅうがく

生年月日、年齢、出身地、現住所に至るまで全てが不明の覆面作家。「アストロノト！」で第3回MF文庫Jライトノベル新人賞優秀賞を受賞。本作・武装学園小説「緋弾のアリア」は、同作家の2シリーズ目となる。

【イラストレーター】

こぶいち

ゆずソフト所属の原画担当。
代表作は「ぶらばん！」「E×E」「夏空カナタ」「天神乱漫」。
小説では「これはゾンビですか？」（富士見書房）の挿絵を担当。
趣味はゲーム、読書。
ゲームはもっぱら携帯ゲームばかりをプレイ中。
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MEDIA FACTORY

緋弾のアリアⅦ　火と風の円舞（キャスリング・ターン）

東京武偵高校、そこは武力を行使する探偵——通称『武偵』を育成する特殊な学校。強襲科の超エリートでＳランクの最強武偵・アリアのパートナーに選ばれてしまった（普段は）ただの一般人・遠山キンジは、戦闘不能におちいったレキを京都に残し、東京への帰路についていた。アリアとの仲も修復できていない……そんな状態の中、再び『万武（ワンウー）』の魔の手が迫り——。理子の座席に仕掛けられた『加速爆弾（ハリー・アップ）』によって暴走特急と化した列車を舞台に、アリアとキンジの超高速リベンジバトルが始まる！そして舞い降りる、一陣の風——。大スケールアクション＆ラブコメディー第７弾!!

MF文庫 J

赤松中学の本

アストロノト！ 1〜3［イラスト：bomi］

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緋弾のアリアⅡ 燃える銀氷
［イラスト：こぶいち］

緋弾のアリアⅢ 蜂蜜色の罠
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緋弾のアリアⅣ 堕ちた緋弾
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［イラスト：こぶいち］

緋弾のアリアII

Aria the Scarlet Ammo

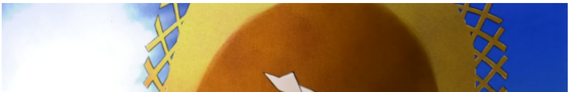
火と風の円舞（キャスリング・ターン）

赤松中学

Aria

CaoCao
Kinji

Reki



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緋弾のアリアⅦ

火と風の円舞（キャスリング・ターン）

赤松中学

MF文庫J

アリア7巻
発売おめでとう
ございます!!

アリアもとうとう7巻！
7といえばラッキーセブン的なね。
めでたいヽ(´▽`)ノ

今回は表紙がジャンヌということで、
「剣を持たせてほしい」という発注をいただきまして。
剣の柄の部分に文字が彫られている、という脳内設定
だったのですが、赤松先生がきちんと文章を
考えてくださいました！赤松先生有難うございます！

アリアはコミックの方も目が離せない感じで
私の細部のフワっとした絵をこよか先生がきちんと
絵にして下さってて感涙です。

さて今回もラストが大変なことになってたので次回が楽しみですー！

1st Ammo: Case E8

Reki.

Always expressionless, unfeeling and taciturn Reki.

Protecting me on orders from the "wind", the Reki who, armed with only a single sniper rifle, bravely took on the Ten Thousand Skill Warrior Koko.

Under the starlight, that Reki was sprawled on the roadway.

"This wound.....It's not a gunshot wound."

Said Shirayuki's younger sister, Kazayuki, who was kneeling on one knee at Reki's side.

The astonishment at her previously abrupt and hard to believe exclamation about Reki's bloodline still remained. However, now is not the time to be speaking about family lineages.

Medical aid for Reki has to be quickly administered.

"Reki was wounded by some sort of light that I don't really understand; some kind of invisible bomb. She bled considerably before you arrived. Shirayuki, your....healing art or something; can't you use it?!"

Clinging onto my words, I shook Shirayuki by the neck, trying to get rescue to come.

"Ordinarily, I would be up to the task......but right now, my powers are unstable."

"Unstable....?"

Kazayuki explained to me with my furrowed eyebrows,

"Lately, in Japan...no, throughout the whole world, there has been a weakening of supernatural abilities. The reason for this drop in success rate is unknown. Among the Hotogi, the ability to heal wounds has been especially limited. In the event of failure, it could kill the person."

I weakened at her words....

Somehow or other, simply having Shirayuki's magic turn the game for the better would not be the case.

Then how can I.....

As I agitatedly paced around, Shirayuki took Reki's temperature.

"Terrible. Her body temperature has plummeted to extremely low levels. If we don't get her to a hospital fast...."

From behind, Shirayuki and her sisters boarded a convertible, a Himiko, a solid sedan of Mitsuoka Automobile and a Kushinada that came along with it.

Shirayuki and her sisters used this bulletproof car for retreat in accordance with the battle situation.

Just perfect. These guys can transport Reki.

However....

"Don't go to a hospital. Our enemy from just now, Koko, was using a sniper rifle."

Right now, there is no sniper here.

If the hospital in the city came under attack from a sniper rifle, we won't be able to do anything.

Urban areas with plenty of buildings are where a sniper holds the most advantage.

"In that case, we'll take Reki-sama to a branch shrine of the Hotogi. We'll call a doctor there."

Kazayuki grudgingly soaked her miko garb in blood carrying Reki.

Carrying Reki in the back seat of the Kushinada, I supported her, together with my neighboring passenger. With our cell phones destroyed, Shirayuki got into the co-driver's seat and called Butei High.

With the engine primed forward, Kazayuki settled down on a passenger seat with a sharp expression. Right now, her wakyuu was in her hands in preparation for a pursuit with Koko.

The driver opposite and the driver here; both of them dazzling beauties started their vehicles to maintain a lookout over the river bank, heading down the mountain road.

"Kin-chan, it's connected. The Masters' night duty room. It's Nangou sensei."

I accepted the white cell phone from Shirayuki, and explained the situation to Nangou-sensei of Snipe; how during Caravan I, we came under sniper attack on the outskirts of Kyouto, the battle near Mt Hiei, Reki's wounding and the assailant being a Hong Kong exchange student named Koko. The silent Nangou listened to my words, all the while not saying anything.

"That's Case E8, Tohyama. The Masters cannot act."

A low voice at the end was the reply.

Case E8.

That was cipher code for "possibility of perpetrators within being high and as such, this common knowledge cannot be leaked out. Make contact with trusted individuals as active partners; resolve issue by the hand of concerned parties."

Nangou's decision was....right. The perpetrator infiltrated under the disguise of an exchange student from Hong Kong.

If the situation became common knowledge amongst the entirety of the student body, the enemy could obtain information.

Thus, Butei Article Chapter 4:

Butei must be independent.

Upon reaching their 2nd or 3rd year in Butei High, it is a general rule that they defeat their enemies on their own.

Those who receive aid from the Masters are interns or inexperienced first years. As it was not like I joined only recently, I somewhat understood Butei High's education policy. I understood....Nangou's callousness. Although, the one who's been attacked is your student, can't you be more worried?

"If unarmed civilians get involved, contact me again Tohyama."

.....It would be too late if that happens.

Muttering in the depths of my heart, I made my salutations and cut the connection with Nangou.

Two vehicles sped down the mountain from the national highway 367 towards highways 105 and 106. During a stop at an intersection, Kazayuki nocked an arrow and briefly raising her bow, surveyed the bank. Casting a sidelong glance, I called Riko from Shirayuki's phone.

(Koko's modus operandi resembles Riko's in some parts.)

Vocaloid warnings, submachine gun mounted radio controlled devices. Conversely, Riko's close combat technique in the confrontation with Haimaki at Butei High had the feeling of Kungfu.

Perhaps she may have some kind of connection with Koko. However, my call could not connect. Riko was out of range. Yesterday at Osaka, I encountered by chance Riko and Aria who were speaking of working together. When I tried to make a call, Aria was out of range.

In the midst of such a serious affair, where are those two? They aren't near at all.

(......Koko....)

Unable to do anything, I again considered from where our enemy may target us.

Just who is she?

A superhuman capable of combining hand to hand combat skills rivaling mine in Hysteria Mode, handgun skills that can evenly match Aria's and sniper skills equal to that of Reki......The face of I-U? I wouldn't happen to know.

With that being the case, I called Jeanne who, just like Riko, had her roots in I-U. It took six calls to get a response from Jeanne, who was sleeping in the middle of the night.

"Hotogi? What's the matter?"

A clear voice emitted from the phone.

"No, it's me. Tohyama Kinji. I'm calling from Shirayuki's phone."

"......? It....It's the middle of the night. Why are you using Shirayuki's phone?"

Ignoring the suspicion in her voice, I urgently explained the situation.

"Jeanne, is there a sniper of Reki's skill within I-U? A monster with hand to hand combat and handgun skills. Her name is Koko," I asked.

"Sniper.....Koko? None. Except for Sherlock, a sniper with the skill to exchange shots evenly with Reki does not exist in I-U. There are people like Patra who use sniper rifles but they are of modest skill."

Then Koko....is not a remnant of I-U.

With my face sheer white, I recounted the words Reki had spoken.

"The enemies from here onwards cannot be beaten through a simple contest of force."

The enemies from here on.

(Reki...)

Losing my desire to sleep, I held Reki and clenched my teeth in frustration.

You, we..... How can fighting be even possible now?

Reki......!

Within the powerful Hotogi shrine, the organization is divided into the main shrine and branch offices.

The branch office also doubles as a branch shrine. There was a large branch shrine of the Hotogi shrine in Kyoto. Around the time we arrived there, a warm rain had begun to fall from the lightening sky.

On the wet asphalt scented road, megumi miko stood on alert. These were young miko who served full Hotogi miko like Shirayuki and Kazayuki. The megumi miko carried Reki away on a stretcher and led me, Shirayuki and Jeanne who had rushed over in a taxi to the shrine.

Ascending a flight of meticulously swept stone steps.....

"Tohyama, this place is just like a city. Reki will be safely protected here," Jeanne said as she calmly surveyed the surroundings.

"Ah. Upon arrival I felt that the Hotogi's head and branch shrines were slightly different from normal shrines. It looks like a shrine yet its construction also resembles a fortress."

Below was a garage. We saw the two vehicles being used some moments ago entering there.

Not only cars but Kawasaki Heavy Industries OH-1 Ninja reconnaissance helicopters were housed there.

--The honden of the Kyoto branch of the Hotogi shrine was situated at the top of a hill overgrown with Japanese cedar.

Where snipers are concerned, they would be unable to take up position beneath the slope and fire into the interior of the shrine.

Additionally, with the exception of the entrance torii, samurai estates ringed with walls of mortar guarded the entire approach.

Beneath the torii, Kazayuki, who had arrived earlier, stood sentinel in formal red armor and her wakyuu in hand. Koko wouldn't succeed if she were to blindly pursue us here.

"This way Kin-chan," Shirayuki said as she led us under the torii to a first-aid mansion resembling Kazayuki's clinic.

Summoned nurses and a female doctor immediately crowded one of the rooms where Reki was brought into. Medical equipment and medicines filled the area around them.

"Oh...oh.....you took a hit there....."

The young female doctor fixing her rimless glasses who greeted Reki was brandishing a handgun. It seems like Hotogi summoned a professional from the Medic DA. Medic Butei are like medic troopers in the army: key personnel who give emergency treatment to wounded Butei. In Butei High, it's the Medica who train these Butei.

"Blood cell count, blood type determination - cross match, biochemistry check – ASAP, begin blood transfusion."

Immediately, the nurses monitoring Reki's condition hurried to carry out the doctor's instructions.

"Boy, while we work here, you go take a rest. Your face looks like a corpse," the doctor said as she cast a sidelong glance at me.

"I can't help at all? Reki; she..." With that, I, who could not take my eyes off Reki calmly walked towards Shirayuki.

"It's okay, Kin-chan. This is a doctor under contract with Hotogi. She's the number one doctor in Kyoto. Wait. Tell me what's wrong."

"Listen Shirayuki..."

Certainly, it was frightening getting used to the methods of the doctor currently treating Reki. Almost assuredly, under normal conditions wounded Butei would have been first examined.

(Reki....)

Last night, all I could do was administer first-aid on Reki. It goes without saying that Shirayuki would allow only professionals to administer full blown medical care.

The nurses' assistant.

"I'll assist. It isn't advanced grade aid but I possess Pan-European Aegis Assistant qualifications," Jeanne said as she skillfully donned a surgical apron and nurse's cap.

This isn't my place at all.

Thinking about that, why does it feel as if a thread of mental strain is about to be cut?

(.......Uu.......)

My vision faded with a great tremor.

"Kin-chan!?"

"Tohyama!?"

Shirayuki and Jeanne's voices desperately called from far off in the distance.

What happened to me.....?

The floor that I had been standing on earlier...

Appeared before my eyes...?

What's that.....sound that I'm hearing?

This is the sound of the wind.

The sound of a dry wind blowing out from the surroundings.

I found myself in the middle of a vast steppe with mountain ranges visible in the distance.

This is probably......a dream.

A dream in which you are self-aware. A lucid dream.

In this arid steppe, several horses could be seen.

Girls dressed in vividly colored traditional garb rode on those horses.

With severe expressions, they carried old, Russian-made sniper rifles on their backs.

At their head, was a girl with hair ornaments more exquisite than the others.

She approached on noticing my gaze.

That face.....

(Reki....?)

".........Reki........"

....

.........I awoke.

There was no wind but the sound of rain. This is......yes....The Hotogi branch shrine in Kyoto.

After the wounded Reki had been treated by the doctors, I had collapsed from exhaustion. Sitting upright in the futon, I looked around my surroundings. I understood how I had come to be lying down in this large Japanese-style room. Beneath the hanging scrolls, I saw an old clock. It was close to noon.

(Reki....How is she?)

Before I knew it, I had changed out of my glossed silk night clothes into the neatly folded and washed uniform arranged by my bedside, opened the paper sliding door and headed outside. In the nightingale floored corridor, Shirayuki, in her miko garb and with sword in hand, knelt quietly. She was acting as my escort. For some reason, her face wore an expression of suspense as she glanced towards the direction of the torii. Looking over her shoulder, she finally became aware of my presence.

"Kin-chan!"

Pyon! Shirayuki flew from a kneeling posture to standing.

Tayun!

"......."

Shi-Shirayuki....as a result of that excessively vigorous jump, that overly massive chest was late by a single beat in swaying. Right now...suddenly right after I woke, a wonderful sight greeted my eyes.

As usual, they were of a size far beyond that of a high school student. 1.5 times that of Riko's, 3 times that of Reki's, 6 times that of Aria's. As I was still mainly stunned however, in terms of Hysteria level, I was fine. As I thought that, Shirayuki stroked me while making sure that I was alright. With teary eyes she gently caressed my arms and head.

"Kin-chan, Kin-chan, I think my heart nearly stopped because of your sudden collapse......!"

"Ah, aahhh. I'm fine, thank you. I was just a little tired, that's why. That aside, how's Reki?"

Shirayuki delicately brushed aside my question.

"Reki-san survived. However, we definitely cannot relax yet. She still hasn't regained consciousness. If she had over-exerted herself any more than this, her life would really be in danger."

"I see...."

"Kin-chan too....do not over exert yourself. Rest in your futon. The danger from the side of the torii seems minor for now."

Said Shirayuki, facing the torii in a manner protective of me.

"Torii....?"

"Un....it can't be seen very well from here........for some time now, it seems some kind of animal is in the area."

Shirayuki said as she looked over her shoulder in the direction of the torii. Amidst the drizzle, Kazayuki held her wakyuu in one hand like a staff, shooing in a bid to drive away something.

.....grrr......

"!"

Barefooted as I am, I leapt at the growl coming from the direction of the stone steps.

Amidst the rain, kicking up gravel as I ran through the compound with Shirayuki's and Kazayuki's restraining voices at my back, I leapt from the torii.....

".....Haimaki!"

The torn and ragged silver wolf lay on the edge of the stone steps.

The rain beaten Haimaki was visibly marked with horrific wounds. Bitten by Koko's hunting dogs and rent by claws, that snow white coat now resembled a shredded rag stained with blood and mud.

"Haimaki......you.....!"

Stumbling as I ran down the stairs, I embraced Haimaki.

During the sniper battle the night before, Haimaki had acted as a decoy so that Reki and I might escape.

One single animal taking on some ten hunting dogs.

Against such overwhelming numerical superiority that survival seemed impossible, Haimaki had returned alive.

After driving off the hunting dogs, Haimaki had tracked us first by the scent of Reki's blood, and from the point where that became disrupted, by the scent of the car's tires until he had discovered this place.

"Thank goodness, Haimaki. Reki still lives thanks to you.....!"

I said, as I patted his back.

Relieved, Haimaki lowered his throat and grunted.

Haimaki, who had been taken to the medical station firmly refused to move from the bedside of the sleeping, bandage-covered Reki.

With no other choice, the doctors and nurses began Haimaki's treatment at that spot.

With the first stage of that treatment completed, the medical staff accordingly kept watch on me all the way throughout.

"Kin-chan....are you hungry? I am going to prepare some food."

On hearing Shirayuki, who had worn a frilly apron over her miko garments mention that, I became thoroughly aware of my empty stomach.

Come to think of it, I did not get to eat the half box of Calorie Mate last night.

Following Shirayuki, I, who had collapsed from this reason, met up with Jeanne, who was strolling around with a deep interest in the shrine's interior. The three of us headed towards the kitchen hall which resembled a ryoutei.

The Kyouto branch shrine of the Hotogi is colossal; a great number of buildings interconnected by passageways attached to rooftops. As we crossed over, the megumi miko who occasionally appeared would kneel at the end of the passageways and bow deeply as soon as they saw me.

What the heck.....it's just like a daimyo's procession.

On that matter, the Hotogi is a shrine which is utterly forbidden to males. For some reason, the males of the Tohyama have special entrance rights. Because of this rule, males have been strangely accorded special treatment. It feels as if one is in foreign lands.

(Such self-humiliating behavior.....it's totally not necessary....)

Feeling vaguely irritated by that, we entered the kitchen hall. There, Jeanne and I prepared the small paulownia wood chairs we would use. Facing us was Shirayuki's seat.

I was probably the first male to sit on this seat. Because of the need to welcome Jeanne, a foreign guest, apron wearing megumi miko reverently set the table and brought in lacquered circular soup containers.

The menu consisted of flounder, turban shell, squid soumen sashimi, daggertooth pike conger, salted salmon roe sushi, tofu greater burdock rolls, kyouyasai sauce, matsutake mushroom over a charcoal fire, rice with the colors of autumn, black bean.....

"I'm sorry Kin-chan. That is all I have......I think the nutritional value is perfect. Eat a lot and recover your health, okay?"

Is...is this all? The Hotogi sure are rich....I mean, this meal seems indiscriminately large for just me....

"Thank you Shirayuki, it's really a little too much. Even so, excuse me for not apologizing yet. Sorry for suddenly bringing in a wounded person."

"Uun....it's ok. You can rely on me any time when there is trouble."

Shirayuki nodded her head with a gentle look in her eyes and a smile. At that, I again felt distress for Reki and glanced in the direction of the medical station.

"Don't worry Tohyama. While I was assisting, I saw that that female doctor was skilled in her work. The treatment was adequate. With rest, Reki will surely regain consciousness." Said Jeanne, who sat down elegantly and crossed her arms before helping herself to the meal. From a side glance, I saw that she was using chopsticks perfectly. Rather than being unskillful, she was more skilled than a Japanese person. Beside me, Shirayuki was making additional checks to the food by hand. Finally, my own chopsticks were in her hands.

"But....why were Kin-chan and Reki-san targeted?"

"In the end, I have no idea."

"Where were you targeted? You were both targeted together? Eh? Together...together....? Errm....why are Kin-chan and Reki-san together...?"

"Ah....." I faltered.

This is hard to explain. I cannot skillfully convey it, unstable as Shirayuki is.

"Tohyama started living together with Reki from the start of this month." Jeanne murmured an elaboration from my side. With a forceful sound, Shirayuki's chopsticks came to a halt.

"O...oi.....Jeanne...."

"It can't be helped. The Hotogi are now involved in this. Information must be shared."

I whispered into the ridiculously serious Jeanne's ear.

"Be careful with what you share. Watch how you handle Shirayuki. Don't say anything unnecessary."

"Anything unnecessary......? Hmm. Well then I'll just mention the main points. Tohyama and Reki acted together during the field trip and stayed together at the same inn. According to the female owner of the inn which came under sniper attack, both of them bathed together as well as slept together in the same futon. It was then that they came under attack. In short, those two continuously acted together; those two were attacked together. Is this ok ?"

"No it isn't!"

.....Fuck you, Jeanne...

Jeanne, as might be expected from an Informa student, had last night sought out information from the ryokan that was attacked by calling the proprietress. Damn it, she really got hold of that extraneous information all too quickly. I mean, she got part of the story wrong.

"......"

Quietly, Shirayuki looked in my direction.......

Some time ago, her posture had gone rigid, her chopsticks failing to pick up any of the black beans.

She wasn't blinking at all.

S-Scary!

"Jeanne, please be silent for a while. I'll do the explanation."

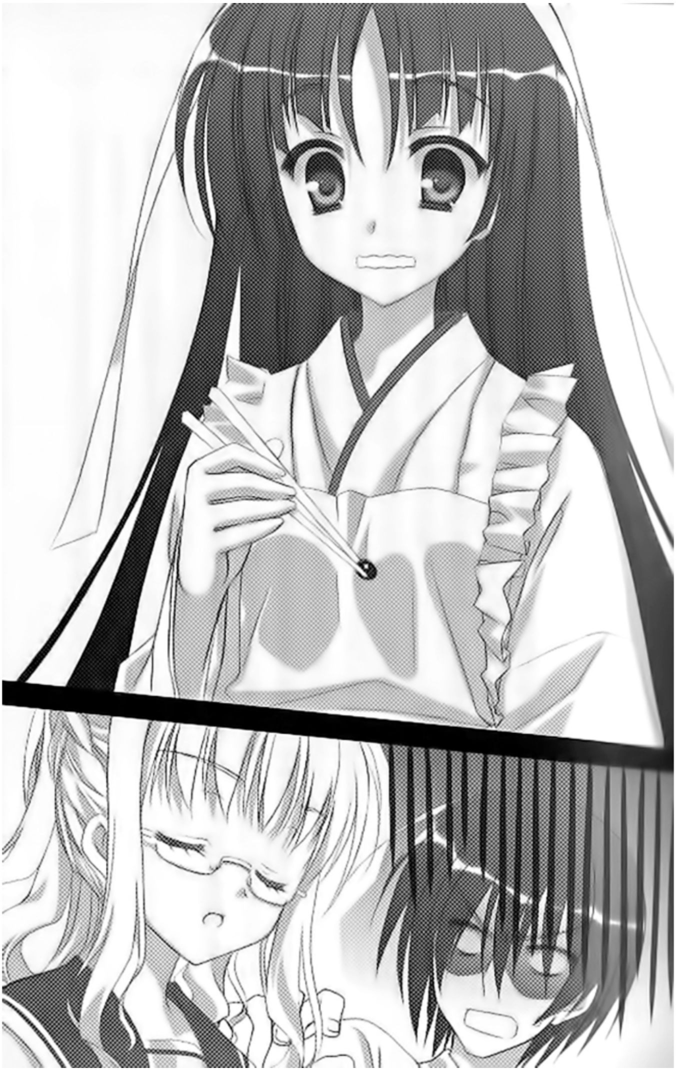
"Why? I believe I already recounted all the facts."

"The way you recount facts is exactly the problem!"

"Oh? Was it hard to understand? In that case, should I recount it by drawing instead?"

"N-No. Please no. Anything but that. But that's not the point. The way you tell the truth..."

"But the truth is the truth,"



Pishari! Jeanne flatly responded, unable to read the mood of the conversation. *Gushari!* Came the sound of Shirayuki's chopsticks.

She had turned pale and was looking over her shoulder.

"The truth....the whole truth....the whole truth.....eh. Beaten there first huh.....by Reki. A,ha...a,ha....a. She was one of those who didn't stand out much so you were unprepared eh, Shirayuki? That's right. Unprepared....However, how were you still unable to notice that girl's ambush Shirayuki...un. Reki's a sniper, so she'll ambush. It was unfortunate for you Shirayuki....that's right."

T-Terrible.

Shirayuki has started to talk to herself in a broken voice. One person playing two personalities. Furthermore, why did she start suddenly addressing Reki without honorifics?

"H-Here Shirayuki. Come back to reality. I'm telling you, I was Reki's intern sniper. I was doing it for the purpose of inducing Lima Syndrome. It was a last resort...." For some reason, I felt utterly helpless while trying to explain.

"Excuse me," said a small voice as the interior sliding screen opened.

Sitting in the corridor with the same flowing black hair as her elder sister.....Kazayuki.

Excellent. Although it was unplanned, it was a nice assist, Kazayuki.

With that, Shirayuki's attention was diverted.

"Ka...Kazayuki. How's the situation outside?"

I asked with a stiff face, seizing upon the fleeting chance this conversation offered.

"Currently, there is nothing out of the ordinary here. At this moment, the watch at the torii is being carried out by the megumi miko."

The miko robes Kazayuki were wearing appeared brand new. It seems she had taken a bath. The faint scent of shampoo still lingered.

Apparently, Kazayuki had business with Shirayuki as she gave me a bow and proceeded to sit next to her sister, whispering something softly into her ear. Shirayuki, whose eyes had dimmed, turned to me with a sigh.

"......As I thought, Riri....I was certain wasn't I?"

Hearing this highly important news, Shirayuki completely regained her senses. Suddenly resting her chopsticks with a click before the expressionlessly bowing Kazayuki.....

"S...sorry Kin-chan. I have been disrespectful towards Reki-san. Thank you for the meal."

Leaving her half eaten meal, she hurriedly disappeared into the interior of the room.

In this uneasy atmosphere, we ended our meals prematurely and returned to the medical station. There, Reki was lying on a futon, watched over by the megumi miko. For some reason or another.....the behavior of the girls watching over Reki did not seem as if they were attending to a simple wounded person. It was more like they were tending to some distinguished and important person....

Shirayuki, who had earlier left the kitchen hall, was in the midst of the megumi miko. Together with Kazayuki, they all sat, gazing down on Reki with firm expressions which were figuratively speaking, like swords.

"......Kin-chan. An explanation now would be utterly necessary. I know you didn't want to hear the details about it... Forgive me."

"I didn't want to hear about it? What are you talking about?"

"The matter of Irokane."

........Irokane.

The subject of Sherlock Holmes's long years of research. It's usage could turn a normal human being into a powerful ability user. A fragment of the supernatural metal had been fired into Aria's body as a result.

"Last month, when Kin-chan was hospitalized, I heard from Aria what happened with I-U. That's why....Kin-chan also knows......The existence of Irokane."

Shirayuki looked up at me with a serious face.

I remained silent, giving a tiny nod.

"There are limits to how much I can say.....we Hotogi miko also know about Irokane."

That I know.

Sherlock had mentioned it aboard the I-U.

I-U are not the only ones to hold possession of Irokane.

Among that list of organizations and groups, was the Hotogi. Yet for all that, what was Reki's connection with Irokane?

"It may be difficult to understand but Irokane is a metal that is linked to a person's heart. Accordingly, it chooses a heart that is capable of connecting with it."

"I know that. Sherlock said awakening the HihiIrokane......the Hidan, lies with the person's character. If I remember correctly, childlike, prideful characters...."

"Un. However, that is the case for HihiIrokane (Scarlet Irokane)....There are several kinds of other Irokane. One of them is..... RiriIrokane (Azure Irokane)."

.....What.....?

"RiriIrokane....? Is that what Reki possesses?"

"No. Some time ago, despite it being disrespectful, I conducted an inspection of her body and found that that is not the case."

Kazayuki turned her head to the side.

"It's likely that Reki-sama spent a long time in close proximity to RiriIrokane at her birthplace. The RiriIrokane linked with her heart and as it were, she became an existence similar to the miko of that place."

Reki....was in the presence of Irokane.....? What does that mean?

While I was furrowing my eyebrows at this, Kazayuki drew a small scroll from a paulownia box at her side. With a rustle, characters resembling kanji were drawn on the laid out scroll.

"This is the Hotogi Shiseibun. It is the historical record that has been handed down within the Hotogi Shrine. Here, is the description of the RiriIrokane. 'RiriIrokane, when used in a state of calm, nullifies other powers. It hates human hearts, and threatens the Ulus that human hearts bring calamity. The princesses of the Ulus which revere the RiriIrokane have, for generations, sealed their own hearts, their hearts being offerings to the RiriIrokane.'"

"....Ulus...."

Despite not knowing its meaning in its entirety, that word sounded familiar.

Reki had said it on the night we came under sniper assault.

("In that case, Kinji-san can become a part of the Ulus.")

Certainly, that seems like a word used to refer to a family group.

"As I thought. Ulus." Jeanne said while folding her arms.

"......You know what's with that girl, don't you?"

Shirayuki's habitually downcast eyes were slightly lifted, gazing at Jeanne.

"Tohyama requested that I investigate Reki. From the start, I knew some things about her even if I had no positive proof. As a holder of Irokane, the Ulus had ties to I-U...." Jeanne said, blinking her blue eyes below her silver hair.

"The acoustics analysis done by Nakasorachi of Connect had narrowed down Reki's birthplace to several places. One of those areas was that occupied by the Ulus clan."

Ulus tribe.....?

"Where is that tribe from? I've never heard of it."

Hearing my doubtful words, Jeanne gave a small nod of her head.

"That is certainly the case. The Ulus tribe is near the borders of Russia and Mongolia, on the plateau south of Lake Baikal where a few tribes of peoples live in seclusion. Despite that however, their ancestor is someone Tohyama must have heard of before."

Jeanne's eyes fell upon Reki as she continued.

"Conquering Asia with a bow and arrow, the Mongol king Chingiz Khan. The Ulus strongly inherited their ancestor's methods of warfare. Certainly, that's the case with their descendents as well."

Kazayuki said the same thing during Reki's rescue. I couldn't see anything particular in Reki's behavior to refute this. Don't...tell me.....this is seriously true?

"Before, the Ulus, afraid of being outstripped in their mastery of the bow and rifle, were mercenaries. However, their numbers have gradually declined.....5 years ago....well ....I'll have to be frank here. When Sherlock visited the Ulus to open negotiations concerning the Irokane, there were only 47 surviving members of the tribe. Furthermore, they were all female."

Upon hearing that, Reki's words replayed themselves in my mind.

("We, the 47 daughters of the Ulus.")

That means there are no more than 47 people comprising the Ulus tribe. That is why Reki had no surname. No....more like it wasn't necessary, being amongst a people that was only 47 strong and on the verge of extinction.

"The Ulus are an insular tribe, that's why. There's a rampant genetic flaw in their veins that may cause only females to be born to them."

Reki had said before she lost consciousness,

("I've been ordered to find a strong male to be inducted into the Ulus.")

Perhaps this may have been the reason for it.

Even so.....

"But.....wait a minute."

I gave voice to the sense of unease at Kazayuki's and Jeanne's words that I had been feeling since the start.

"Yes?"

"Suddenly speaking about this strange tribe that Reki belongs to, it doesn't make sense. Doesn't Reki look like a Japanese person? Be it eyes or skin colour. Although I never properly asked her about it, she must've dyed her hair."

I regarded the hair above the bandaged brow of the sleeping Reki that the megumi miko were washing. It's often the case that a Butei, who is basically a lone wolf ready to form a team with a random ally at any point, would dye thier hair in specific colors so their peers can distinguish their specialty at a glance. In this case, it is customary for a sniper to dye their hair in "Simo Hayha," a blue-tone color.

"The circumstances may be a bit different, it's similar to how Aria's hair has turned red. It seems Reki's hair has been affected by long years of exposure to RiriIrokane. And as for her appearance of a Japanese person, that's because she has Japanese blood."

Shirayuki responded for Jeanne while looking sideways at me.

"Japanese blood....?"

"Chingiz Khan was in fact Minamoto no Yoshitsune, a rank 9 general (Kurou Hougan[1]) who crossed over into the continent from Japan roughly a thousand years ago. In the Mongol Empire at that time, his name was read as Genghis Khan. It later became Chingiz Khan."

....Oi, oi.....

"I've heard of this before. Isn't this story a fake?"

"It was made to look like a fake story. After the truth was revealed in the Edo Period, the Hotogi requested historians to..."

"The Hotogi?"

"Un. At that time, the Hotogi shrine aided in Yoshitsune's crossing to the continent; a boat left in secret from Tsugaru."

Shirayuki absentmindedly fiddled with her left and right index fingers, keeping them in front of her chest while pointing them towards each other, fingertips touching. As she did so, her eyes were turned upwards. A major event in history occurs and she's acting like a child whose prank has been exposed. Well, such disjointedness is only typical of Shirayuki....

"The Hotogi shrine of that era was embroiled in complicated politics. Ever since the Yoshitsune formally established a state in the continent, there has been a flurry of back and forth intelligence on the Irokane. The name **Reki**[2] is one of the names they traditionally use for pure blooded princesses there."

Kazayuki pointed out the kanji for **Reki** on the scroll she took out just now.

"It seems that Kazayuki is knowledgeable even regarding the names of princesses overseas."

"Kazayuki is the miko in charge of foreign diplomacy with churches and temples overseas. I'm a specialist in the internal administration of the shrines within the country..... That's why Reki's name never rang a bell to me that she's related to the Ulus."

In regret for not noticing this earlier, Shirayuki hung her head in shame.

"Don't take it so hard, Shirayuki. No one could have imagined that Reki is a princess from a foreign country, or a descendent of the Genji. I for one, find this extremely hard to swallow."

Despite that having been said, Reki's normal behavior would have befitted that of a warrior. Cradling her sniper rifle, habitually sleeping in a seated posture, she was every inch the samurai. Truly, she was the descendent of the samurai.

Outside the porch of the medical station, the rain had improved and the sunrays were returning. In the nadeshiko[1] covered courtyard, Hotogi swallowtail butterflies that had sought shelter from the rain under the leaves now fluttered around. There was a hint of calm under the noisy atmosphere. I took a metal brush and tools from a lone megumi miko and sat on the porch......maintaining the sniper rifle of the sleeping Reki in the room behind me. Removing the magazine, I placed a Butei bullet; equal to six shots of a normal one, in the pocket of Reki's uniform. This round was left over from that long battle. After all that, we ran out of ammo not while using handguns but as snipers.

Like the top of an enormous piece of brown seaweed, Reki diligently scoured her room, singling out a bullet and copying it CG-like in uniformity, each one glittering in flawlessness, just like gemstones.

"It's beautiful. Japan's witches using magic which make the papillon their familiars."

Looking up at that voice, I saw Jeanne coming to the porch.

"Tohyama, it may not be very helpful but in a short while I'm leaving Kyoto. I'm having a preparatory meeting with Kanzaki Kanae's lawyer before the trial."

Looking at her wrist watch, Jeanne said apologetically.

....Trial.

Aria's mother, Kanzaki Kanae, who was burdened by the false accusations laid on her by I-U is soon to be retried in court. Now is the period for preparing the legal documents. Kanae-san's lawyer is scheduled to interview Vlad, who's currently under custody at a Level 5 detention facility in Nagano, after which she's scheduled to meet with Jeanne who would be a witness in court.

"Tohyama, there is a word that all of you used during your conversations just now that I don't understand. Genji. What is that?"

"Genji....well....they all no longer exist now. They were one of the famous samurai houses acting as regents in Japan around a thousand years back." I said while cleaning the Dragunov despite my knowledge of Japanese history being not very good.

"The Ulus had their roots in the samurai."

Jeanne turned behind and gave Reki a look, her face looking as if she thought of something.

"Tohyama, about you being forced into marriage by Reki last month..."

".....Aa."

"According to samurai tradition, the female is officially the property of the male."

On hearing this, I recalled Reki's actions and words. Calling herself my possession and listening to everything I say.....The decree of Reki's marriage contract; that was a strange form of male domination over a female.

On that subject,

"During Chingiz Khan's time....there was a similar practice in the Mongol Empire. The Mongol customs of the time declared that females were 'treasures.' Just like silver or gold, they were taken amidst the plunder."

"Plunder..."

"Females were abducted and made their own wives; literally a custom of 'pillage wives.' One of the traces of that custom that can be found in the present day Mongolia is that on the eve of a marriage ceremony, the female is mock abducted."

".....That, that's....."

I slightly tugged my cheeks as Jeanne gave a small nod.

"Now you realize it. That's exactly what Reki did to you, Tohyama."

"Oi...oi.... But Reki's a girl. Boys and girls are total opposites."

"After a long time, male and female cultures become one. That transformation is not uncommon. For example, in Europe in the former half of the 19th century, it would have been unthinkable for a lady to wear this wristwatch," pointing at my wristwatch, Jeanne continued.

"Particularly, the Ulus tribe is comprised of nothing more than a few females. It is little wonder they passed down the tradition of abducting superior members of the opposite sex to save their genetic lineage."

So that....explains it.

"Reki's nature is unique. She's practically a modern, living samurai of a sort," Jeanne, who herself carried the same warrior character, said. With a look that seemed to be telling me something, Jeanne sat herself beneath my gaze.

"Finally, one more thing....yesterday, when you were being pursued, did Reki do anything extreme to an extent?"

"Extreme to an extent?"

"For example, try to shoot herself with her own gun."

At this, I looked upwards.

"I...understand. Yes. Reki was wounded. While we were being pursued, she would have blown herself up with the DAL. She would have left herself behind since she didn't have the strength to escape on her own."

"As expected of her."

So saying, Jeanne shifted her focus onto the bullet I had laid out on the cloth.

"The Ulus have the same practice as the samurai's hara-kiri. "The last bullet".....The remaining bullet would be fired if survival seemed impossible in the face of pursuit, or if she was encumbering her master. That bullet would be used to end herself."

"........"

"Samurai would use a tantou to slice their bellies open; the Ulus would shoot themselves. They would die an honorable sacrifice for their masters."

As Jeanne said this, I looked back at Reki.

"Like a single bullet that has been fired, those girls lived solely for their aims. And so, this is carried over into battle. The last bullet....would be use to close the chapter of their lives. Sacrificing themselves by their blades, the samurai of old were the same. Tohyama, this is the girl that Reki is. Be careful of that."

Leaving me with those words, Jeanne left the porch and headed down the corridor to await the Hotogi's chauffer. Left alone at the porch, I cradled the Dragunov.....Reki at my back.

(Reki...)

I am a descendent of the Tohyama bloodline. After a fashion, I am still a samurai. Yet the last bullet? Never.

"Reki...."

I held one of the bullets from the sniper rifle and spoke to the sleeping Reki behind me.

.....I am a single bullet......

Always, Reki said these words.

"You are not a bullet."

As a single bullet, she would have lived purely for her goal....by a bullet, she would have died.

That's just too much.

"You are human."

I stated this obvious fact through gritted teeth to the sleeping Reki.

At this moment, you, who are clearly without an ego, are truly a girl who is like a child.

Reki. Somewhere, you were brainwashed by the "wind", made to exist solely for your goal, prevented from thinking for yourself and frozen in the time when you were a child. And so, you lived your life like an unfeeling bullet; like a robot.

And yet.....Reki.

At your very core, some hint of humanity still exists. That night when you were beaten in that sniper battle; that final smile you gave me....you looked just like a human girl. It was a lovely, honest smile.

"You are....not very good in understanding this that's why I will not say that you would immediately become a person filled with normal feelings. But.....please, don't ever call yourself a bullet again."

At any rate, she could not possibly hear it; Reki was comatose. However, I continued to speak over my back. That was an irrepressible thing that I had to say.

"Reki, as Reki...as a human being, become even happier. You should find happiness. Right now, the happiness as a human that has been forbidden to you; you must take it back. You must live your own life."

Speaking about those two happy days you spent with me it was, to me, more enjoyable than I imagined. That ramen speed eating battle in the fort, feeding Haimaki fish sausage, and what about at Chaton Call? Besides participating in the cat herding competition in Osaka, there were many other things. Perhaps only all those things that the "wind" didn't order you to do......weren't they giving you the happiness of being human? I don't know for sure, but for some reason, I have the feeling of that being true.

"That is why, if you wish it so, those things...no matter how small, I will always accompany you from beginning to end."

Girls are troublesome. If I can help it, I would be with them for as little as possible.

But Reki...you....

You....appreciate me. Even without that damnable Hysteria Mode.

Well.....you overvalue me I think. To me, that is quite significant.

.......I am a single bullet.....

Reki.

....A bullet has no heart. Therefore, it does not think.....

Please, stop being like that.

I don't know how great your "wind" lord is, but true greatness is a person who can live, choosing his own paths. You, who gave everything up to the "wind" may find living and thinking for yourself difficult.

......it just simply flies towards its target....

But please, stop being like that. Because,

"You are not a bullet."

-you are human.

2nd Ammo: HURRY UP

Honestly, I should have stayed in the Hotogi shrine to watch over Reki, but Kanae-san's trial was fast approaching. And for that, there was an unconfirmed chance that the lawyers would have to speak with us, the people who had fought with I-U, face to face before the trial.

So, on the evening of that day, I left the doctors and Kazayuki to watch over Reki...

Shirayuki and I took the Sanyou Shinkansen - Toukaidou Hope 246, going to Tokyo.

"16, Car 15, Row D-E...Ah, here. It's all the way at the front, Kin-chan! Kin-chan likes the aisle seat, doesn't he? Here you go. Have this ticket."

Pushing the ticket for the aisle seat into my hands and sitting at the window seat, Shirayuki--because she had left the Hotogi, was talking with me incessantly. It seemed like she was trying to encourage me, who barely said a word, worried about Reki.

It was evident that her own heart wasn't calm either. Shirayuki is really a very firm person.

She never forgets to empathize, to be concerned for others, a really good person.

"Shirayuki, thanks a lot."

Sitting down on the aisle seat--

"Eh. Mmm, it's fine. Because--this is the first time I've ridden on the Shinkansen, I wanted to see the scenery, so it's great that I'm sitting at the window seat. On the contrary...if I wasn't riding together with Kin-chan, I would have to take the car again, so...thank you very much."

I had just said a word of thanks, yet Shirayuki's face turned red, and she waved her hands furiously.

Because I saw Shirayuki, who was putting so much effort into being cheerful, abruptly return to her normal self, I laughed softly, a small *Fu* escaping my lips--and Shirayuki made a "Waaa!" expression.

And, to hide her expression, her hands slapped to her cheeks...her face, looked as if she was paying her respects, went all the way down to her lap, a sort of kneeling position, and her body twisted in what seemed like agony, she looked out the window.

Wh...what are you doing...?

"Ahh...at such a short distance, I was blessed with 'Kin-chan laugh'...cool...cool, so cool...!"

While muttering what she was thinking in her heart, Shirayuki was, to put it in Riko terms, making an "excited by something moe face". The feeling of "Kyaaa".

Do you think that I can't see your face? Well, I can see it really clearly in the reflection of the window.

Rather, what's "Kin-chan laugh"? Is it that old comedian's act, Kin-chan run, the one that Muto sometimes does to pick up girls...?

While thinking about that, I reclined in the seat a little, inside the Shinkansen which had just started to move.

I rested, but, is it due to the continuous chain of events that had completely thrown my body's clock into disorder...?

Again, I could not sleep.

I was looking at the scenery outside the Shinkansen, passing by abnormally slowly...*Drowsy, Drowsy*...and...

...

......

....

"While you're sleeping--I'm sorry to disturb you."

...n?

Argh. The train attendant came.

It seemed that, at some point in time, I had really fallen asleep.

"Ah...Yes?"

I showed her the train ticket, however, for some reason, sweating under the uniform cap, the train attendant...only swiftly checked the luggage rack above us and the space below our seats before leaving in a hurry.

It seemed as if she wasn't here to check our tickets.

What did she come here for? She was moving her hands like she was looking for something...well, whatever.

I looked at my watch and already, more than 30 minutes had passed since our departure.

Looking to my side, Shirayuki was also sleeping, continuing to sit upright on the seat.

She seemed to be sleeping deeply, since she didn't seem to have woken up when the train attendant came.

That's to be expected. I had caught a little sleep at Hotogi, but the reason for this was because Shirayuki had been protecting Reki and me throughout the night.

Originally a beautiful person and such, with a beautiful sleeping face as well, Shirayuki...ng...?

"...Fufu...so cute...mnya..."

With an amazingly happy face, she started sleep-talking something.

"...His eyes are exactly like Kin-chan's...ah, his nose looks like mine, doesn't it...ufufu..."

……。

What's happening inside Shirayuki's dream? I mean, before that, what does Shirayuki's dream world have to do with me? Just imagining it is terrifying.

(...I shouldn't think about it too deeply...)

I turned my back to Shirayuki's sleeping face, softly standing up from my seat.

Because I had taken a nap, my fatigue was slightly relieved, but my head was still hazy.

(I'll just go to the washroom for a little while to wash my face.)

Go through the automatic door, going to the end of Car 16...I was going to the washroom on this side of the cab.

But...

Huh? The door isn't opening.

It didn't move at all, almost like it was welded shut. What the hell is this?

Since this wasn't the toilet, I looked in from the small window, but...there was nobody inside.

(It seems that, somehow, the door was broken.)

Since I didn't have any other choice but to use the washroom at the back, I started to walk towards Car 15.

On the Oumi Shinkansen, returning to Tokyo and Chinami, Car 16 is the front most car, and Car 1 is the farthest back.

The train wasn't that crowded, and I looked around while walking--on the rows of seats, three on the right, two on the left, there were many types of passengers sitting there.

Some children playing trump. And, there was what I thought to be their guardian, a pregnant woman, her belly bulging out.

A pair of salary-men, on a business trip, were playing chess against each other with a magnetic chessboard.

Since I had learned the rules of chess from Kana, I sneaked a look as I passed by...one of the players was just using the special move, "Castling".

A movement that switches the king with the rook, "Castling" is--one of the moves I like.

Seeing the two pieces switch places as if dancing in a cycle, just looking at it was rather fun.

(Kana was really good, I didn't even win once.)

While I was reminiscing about the past, I once again started advancing up the aisle.

Ah...having inclined the chair all the way backwards, the man drinking sake was Washio Narau.

He was both an actor and a singer, although besides that, he was a person that was notorious for his excessive vulgarity.

In the middle of the row of three seats, the ones on the left and right occupied by the female assistants he had brought with him, Washio--the eyes beneath his sunglasses met mine, and he went "Tch", as if saying: "I was noticed, huh."

(...What. It's not like I'm gonna start shouting.)

Feeling rather annoyed, I passed by...walking towards the back of the car.

*Ngaaah, Goo...*As I was thinking about who that big guy was, snoring like that, I saw that it was Muto.

Aah, it's so embarrassing to be a Butei just like him. I'm just glad that, at least, there's nobody sitting next to him.

I pretended that he was a stranger, passing by...farthest back on Car 16, for some reason, the seats in the two-seat row had been turned--they were seats whose backs were facing this way.

Above the seat, I could see a red horn sticking out.

To be more correct, it was a hair clip whose front stuck out like a horn.

Attached to pink-blonde twin-tails, sitting there, back facing this way, was--

(...Aria...!)

That's Aria.

Next to her, I could see loose waves of tea-coloured hair, probably Riko's head.

Now that I think about it, during the field trip, Aria was saying something about meeting Riko and Muto at Kure.

These three were taking the train back to Tokyo, huh?

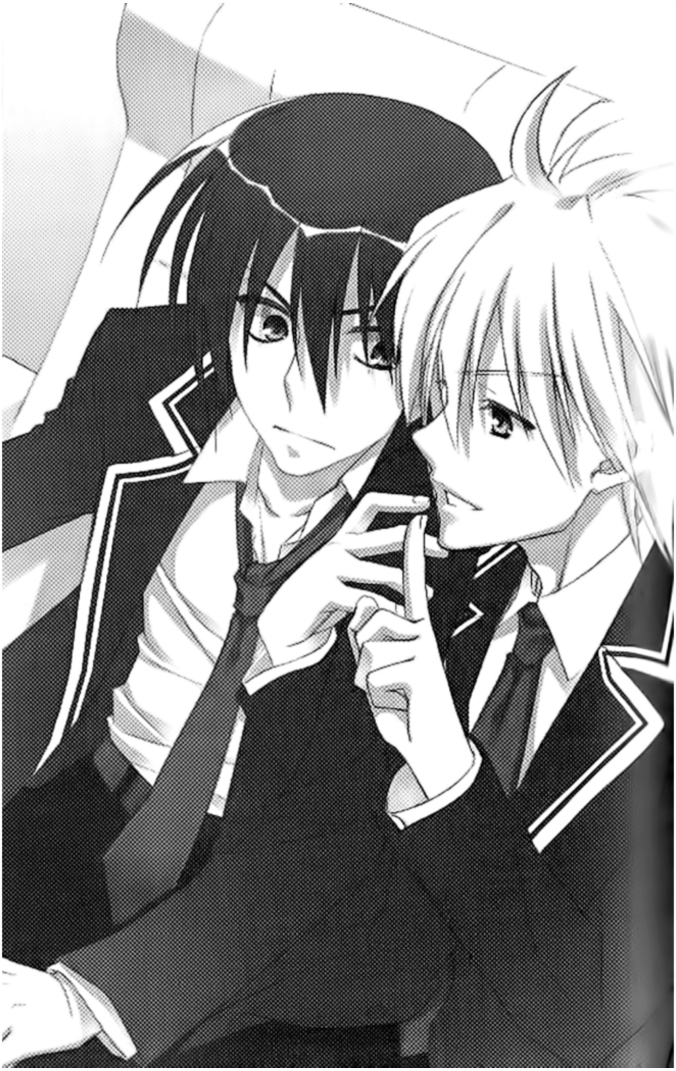
"Ari..."

Stepping forward, just about to tell her about Reki, my arm, *Grab*.

"--?"

I was grabbed by the person who was sitting in one of the seats in front of Aria and Riko, forcefully pulled into the empty seat.

Turning my head, that hand was--Assault's Shiranui Ryou.



While the handsome Shiranui placed a finger in front of his mouth, making a gesture for "be quiet," his left and right eyes flicked open and shut, winking at me.

Decoding that like morse code..「Talking about something interesting; Listen」...?

Trying to ignore it and get up, I was stuck inside Shiranui's arms.

「Let go; I have something to say to Aria.」

I replied.

「Let go.」

「It's fine; Stay like this」

「Let go.」

「It's fine; It's fine」

Forcefully answering with that kind of winking...*Chatter Chatter.*

Looking up the aisle, three Butei High girls were sitting on the three-row seats, looking this way, whispering with each other. Those were students that were in the same class as me, 2A. If I'm certain, Connect.

The three female students, their faces red, were saying: "Pl-player," "Even with boys," "Ca-captured...!", apparently shocked. I could hear about three-tenths of what they were saying.

(...Th-this can't...)

Noticing their serious expressions, if I look at this from an objective point of view--This scene between Shiranui and me. Hands linked intimately, looking at each other directly, not saying anything. Two boys.

Shi-Shiranui. Please at least care about what this looks like in other people's eyes. Even if that isn't so, there's never been any rumors about you getting together with any girls, so it's easy to suspect that you're *that* kind.

For the sake of not having an even worse reputation even more among my class,

「I got it; I got it, so; Let go of my hand; 5 minutes; I'll stay here quietly.」

Communicating that to Shiranui, Shiranui released my hand.

(But, what does he want me to hear?)

Folding my arms in annoyance...I could hear Aria and Riko's conversation from behind me.

"--This is, something that my friend consulted me about. Look, I, ah...be-because, about romance, I don't really understand that kind of thing. Maybe you would understand...I thought."

"Ask anything you want! Riko is a love-romance human Wikipedia!"

...Love? ...Romance?

What. Isn't this the kind of thing that I'm horrible at?

This isn't interesting at all.

"My friend...th-that friend, um, let's call her A-san. This A-san, for a boy...well, he'll be K-kun. Sh-she hasn't clearly told K that she likes him, but um...well, they've been moving together. For a few months.

She understands that K--doesn't have much motivation, but he's a boy that can do anything once he tries. So, A-san has established a collaborative relationship with K, becoming something like friends that fight a lot. And, while they were doing that, A-san has started to feel something like, "he's mine", towards K...that..."

"Hmm, hmm. So, something more than friends but less than lovers. And, the possessive feeling towards the counterpart, it has already started to sprout before officially being together. It's those kinds of symptoms, hmm? Kufufu."

Taking on the air of a teacher, Riko seemed to be having a lot of fun.

In her heart, she likes talking about these kinds of things, right?

"Bu-but. A-san is already going to switch schools very soon. Leaving K at Butei High."

Aria, on another side, was radiating a feeling of slight desperation.

Her tone seemed to suggest that she was talking about herself.

She had said she was talking about a friend, so why'd she become so serious?

"It does exist, you know. Before a school transfer or exam, this kind of boy-girl messy situation. Juruuuuuu."

Wondering what kind of sound it was, I peeked through the gap between the seats and...

On the window seat, Riko was drinking out of a pack of strawberry milk.

And if I looked closer, on top of the table that was attached to the wall was around 20 packs of empty strawberry milk stacked atop each other.

I see. Because she wanted to place them there in such huge numbers, she had reclined her chair back? As usual, she does whatever she wants.

Rather, no matter how I think about it, that's over-drinking strawberry milk.

"But, well, when things had come to that time, Kin-ah, um, K-kun became closer to another girl. This...girl named R-san. She's a type that's completely different from A-san whether it be personality or ability...an outstanding girl."

Looks like the cast of characters has increased.

A-san, K-kun, and R-san, huh.

Well, I don't really care about the story of Aria's friend. Finish up quickly.

"After that, K and R-san started moving together...um..."

"Hmm, hmmm. If K-kun eats nothing but strawberries, won't he want to start eating some melons?"

Extremely serious, Aria asked Riko, who had just said those words, a question: "Are boys like that?"

She's such a gullible person. Aria, that is.

Riko is definitely just saying whatever is most fitting. Judging from her tone.

"That's right~. As opposed to women, who give birth, men are the people who make women give birth. Trying to leave their offspring behind in various types of women is just a natural instinct. Kufufufu."

"Th-that does sound possible."

"On that note, "what kind of girl do I like", is completely different from person to person. What kind of person is K-kun~?"

"--A haremizer!'

Saying that, Aria's tone seemed to be extremely angry.

Although I couldn't see her, I could imagine that her face was demon-like.

Despite the fact that I was completely unrelated to their conversation, a chill ran down my spine.

"Normally he's a failure as a human, but just in front of girls, for an instant, he becomes really cool, amazingly cool...and, my chest starts hurting a lot, and afterwards, I can't do anything but think about it...he says strange things occasionally. Su-suddenly touching me. It's really shocking. He's far too good at that, and over here, I can't do anything, just staying in this state, rather...no matter what the other side does, I probably can't resist, rather...My head becomes...something like...strange. It becomes strange--I mean, um, that, that's what my friend said."

Heh~~? Does a failure of a man like that really exist in our school?

Someone like that really is a devilish bastard.

"Um, just now, um, my friend, A-san said that. Really. That was completely something that my friend, A-san, said."

Hearing Aria remind Riko, Shiranui, who was next to me, burst out into a fit of little giggles.

...What's so funny? I don't get the punchline.

"Well, because K is like that...A-san got into a huge fight with K. But, I-ah, A! A-san, um, before transferring schools, with that K...even if "taking him back" is impossible, she wants just to be able to mend things between them. She knows that its just a selfish wish of hers, but R keeping K as hers like this...when A and K could meet again, K would already be R's captive, and K probably would not be partners with A. So, um..."

At that point, Aria's chair creaked as she drew closer to Riko.

"Wh-what does she do so that K doesn't forget about A-san. That, wh-what does she do before she transfers?"

Somehow...Aria's voice seemed to be frozen with fear.

On another side, Riko, in a very calm manner, went: "Nn~~Fufufu", laughing through her nose.

"A-san-san is about to celebrate her birthday, right? And, her birthday will come right before she transfers."

Saying that, Riko, *Creak*.

Aria jumped off her seat in surprise.

"Yo-you really understand this! Th-that's right."

Ho~~.

Aria too has a friend that she gets along so well with? She even remembers her birthday.

As for me, about my friends birthdays, I don't even remember Shiranui's, who's sitting right here next to me. Of course, I don't remember Muto's either.

I just remember Aria's birthday, as if I had ignored it, I would be subjected to Infinite Windhole Hell, so I had memorized it as pertinent information. I don't really know it accurately, but I do remember that it was during this month.

"Kufufu. That's obvious. It's because Riko is an excellent romance counselor. Kufufu~nn."

Laughing an extremely horrible laugh, Riko,

"--On that day, this love triangle will have a final battle."

"...?"

"A-san cannot be hurried. It's fine if she doesn't do anything. Hold yourself back, and Ki-ku...um. Test K-kun!"

"Te-test...?"

"That's right. Because, if K-kun doesn't hate A-san, he won't let something like a birthday pass without doing anything. I expect that he'll disguise it as birthday wishes, and try to meet you alone."

Gulp.

I could hear the noise of Aria swallowing.

"A parting confession--might be possible. Kufufu..."

"CO, CO-CO-CO-CO-CO-CONFE! SS-ION!"

Aria, lower your voice.

A train is a public vehicle, so don't shout so loudly.

"No, no. K-kun, aside from confessing--he might even do something more than that...!"

"SO-SOMETHING MORE THAN THAT IS FORBIDDEN!"

...So, Aria. Please calm down.

Your Japanese has already become really weird.

"Th-that's ***too much!*** Be-because ***too early for me, for I'm just 17 at that time!*** Lo-lo-look! If something comes so suddenly ***how. how how how'd I ...I...***I !"[3]

Because Aria had started panting and speaking in some sort of alien language, I couldn't understand what she was saying any longer...

「This is stupid；　This much is fine, right?」

I sent some winking signals at Shiranui.

Shiranui too...winked, responding.

「Tohyama-kun；　Do your best, alright?」

「What? I do my best at what?」

「Only thus; Is Tohyama-kun」

Shiranui smiled wryly, smiling and gesturing at me like a hotel concierge, as if conveying, "Please go ahead."

What was that. In the end.

When I tried to stand up, my mouth twisted into a 「へ」 character...at that exact moment.

Guu---

The train swayed, as if it had been tugged forward a little.

"Woah..."

Losing my balance a little, I grabbed hold of the back of the reclined seat.

What happened just now...?

It was only a little speed, but it seemed as if the train had shook from some sort of sudden acceleration.

'Hmm?' Muttering to himself, outside of the window that Shiranui was looking through--Nagoya station flashed past.

This Shinkansen passed by a station.

"...?"

That's strange.

Wasn't this Shinkansen definitely supposed to stop at Nagoya?

This isn't just me misunderstand it, right?

Some passengers, apparently going to disembark here, had an incredulous look on their faces as they returned to the aisles.

Just as they, their expressions dissatisfied, started to make some noise--

「--A notice to our customers.」

An announcement started flowing through the interior of the car.

「This train was supposed to stop at Nagoya, but because of some unexpected　circumstances, it cannot stop.」

...?

「As for those customers that planned to disembark at Nagoya, as soon as these circumstances have been resolved...you will be sent to Nagoya from the closest station by an extra train. We are sorry for the trouble, investigations into the details of said circumstances are currently being held.」

The voice, which I thought belonged to conductor, was trembling slightly.

What's wrong? What happened?

I've never heard of a malfunction that caused a train to hurtle by a station. On the contrary, I would understand if they stopped the train.

That wasn't all that was strange.

Ever since this Shinkansen passed Nagoya, it hadn't slowed down.

Rather...it was speeding up...?

"Hey, what the hell is happening?", "Arrrgh, the job is going to be canceled.", "What the hell are these 'circumstances'" "Could you explain? I didn't understand any of what was said just now."

From between the passengers, who were milling about in confusion, the talent that was reclining in his chair just now, Washio Narau,

"Hey! Conductor, get the fuck out here right now! I have to get off at Nagoya! The audience is already entering the dome, do you know who I am!? Go back to Nagoya!"

-stood up, roaring in anger.

Even though we've already gone past it, he was saying some reckless things.

But, besides that--

(This is bad...)

Agitation is infectious. If the other passengers started to panic because of the weird things he was saying, gathering them all up would become difficult. If I don't quiet him down...

Just as I stood up--

「Also, If there are any suspicious luggage or suspicious items in your vicinity, please alert the stewardesses.」

Continuing as such, the announcer could no longer be tolerated by Washio, who kicked the seat in front of him.

"What the fuck are these 'suspicious items'!? Is there a bomb set on this train or something!? Eh!?"

Fuck, he said it immediately...!

"--Bomb?" "Eh, seriously!? He said a bomb!?" "Hey, it seems that there's a bomb!"

As the passenger's unease grew larger, some people started walking towards the driver's seat.

"Everyone, please calm down." "Please return to your seats!" "A thorough investigation is being conducted--"

The three Butei High girls that had been looking at Shiranui and me earlier stood up, trying to soothe the crowd, but...It's impossible. The situation inside the train was quickly nearing full-blown panic.

This is--

It was bad enough that Washio had stood up and shouted, but the crew's announcement didn't help either. The information that was released was far too vague.

They didn't say anything about when it would be solved, just saying that there were some unnatural circumstances.

As for the Shinkansen, the abnormality that they refrained from releasing an announcement: 「Not stopping at Nagoya」, something that cannot be hidden, beforehand...if there was an announcement that they were sealed inside a train, an enclosed space, it isn't impossible that customers with a short temper, just like Washio, would raise a racket.

A normal person, unlike us Butei, doesn't experience dangerous incidents like this everyday.

"It's dangerous, so please return to your seat."

When Shiranui said that to the pregnant lady, who had stood up, her stomach bulging out--*Whirr*.

Feet swaying, a chain of cries rang out as the passengers stumbled to the back of the train.

The Shinkansen had sped up again.

(What the hell is this...!?)

Looking out the window, the speed we had accelerated--judging from the change of the flow of the scenery, it was only a little.

But, it was too sudden. It was a sudden acceleration that would be impossible under normal circumstances.

Which is to say...It's like the feeling of barely being able to endure it, yet not being able to stop, continually gaining speed.

On the electronic displays above the automatic doors,

--[Current speed: 130km/h]--

-those words were flowing from right to left.

Apparently becoming more uneasy from the 'current speed', the customers started clamoring as they tried to stampede towards the driver's seat.

Washio Narau ran towards the back of the car--*Clank Clank!* Using what appeared to be a very expensive lighter to smash the lid of the emergency door control, which was buried into the wall.

(That idiot! What the hell is he doing!)

Is he planning..to open the door to the Shinkansen manually!?

While in the midst of travel, the lock should be engaged, but now, the Shinkansen was in a situation where I didn't know if it was functioning normally. If by a one in a thousand chance, it opened...things would get ugly!

"STOP!"

I fixed my eyes on Washio, charging one straight line down the aisle, directly towards him.

"--Kinji!?"

"Kin-chan...!"

While hearing Aria's voice, who had just noticed me, and Shirayuki's voice, who had apparently woken up due to the ruckus-- I,

"Calm down! You can't get off! Not at this speed!"

-hurtled towards Washio, performing a full nelson on him.

"Let go! LET GO! I'm going to Nagoya!"

I managed to clamp down on Washio's arms, who had been lashing out at me, binding his arms behind him with the wire in my belt.

At that moment, I heard the announcer once again--

＜＜To all the passengers I will tell you now.＞＞

---!

＜＜This train will not stop at any stations until Tokyo it will go on non-stop Ahaha Ahahahahaha＞＞

--A vocaloid's synthetic voice...!

＜＜The train will accelerate 10 km/h every three minutes not accelerating is impossible otherwise, Kaboom! Big boom! will happen Ahaha Ahahahahahahaha!＞＞

In response to the artificial laughter, cries started ringing out from within Train Hope 246.

This vocaloid. It's the same voice as the one when Reki and I were assaulted by those remote controlled helicopters.

(Koko...!)

This is her doing.

Leaving Washio sitting down, his face about to cry, I looked up at the electronic display--

--[Current speed: 140 km/h]--

We're accelerating. Definitely.

(Express-jack--)

I don't know what her goal is, but she had carried this out extremely thoroughly.

No wonder we hadn't stopped at the station.

It was probably only after the conductor and driver had departed to Tokyo that they received a threat from the offender concerning the bomb.

Earlier, I had thought that she was checking the tickets, but the sweating conductor was actually conducting a search for the bomb.

But...she's really troublesome.

At the front of the car--the direction of the driver's seat, the panicked passengers were jostling against each other, saying things like: "You're going to hit the Shinkansen in front of us, right!?" "Dumbass! It said that there was a bomb!" "That's definitely a prank!", and I could see Shirayuki trying to calm them.

"Tohyama-kun...!"

"Kinji!"

From the back of the car, Shiranui and--Muto, who was completely woken up, ran towards me.

"Shiranui is calculating it right now. If the announcement just now was true, we have until 19:22."

"...19:22...?"

"Without stopping at any stations, if we continue at this pace of acceleration...we'll arrive at Tokyo then."

I frowned at Muto and Shiranui's words.

--Arrive at Tokyo.

There is no more track after that.

If we get there...The End.

Looking at my watch, right now, it's 18:02.

"Until the time limit--we have 80 minutes."

"It'll probably come a little earlier. The announcement earlier...said that we would continue to accelerate. This Shinkansen is model N700, Toukaido route's top operational speed is 270 km/h. After 40 minutes--we'll exceed that."

"If we exceed it, then what?"

"It's impossible to operate safely. The entire car won't be able to stay on the rails, and at a curve, it's possible that it'll disengage."

"Dangerous operation then...how many km/h can we go?"

"It's said that the calculated maximum speed is 350-360 km/h. The actual limit wasn't announced by Japan Railways."

Beside Muto, who had said that, Shiranui was using the calculator function on his phone to immediately calculate the speed and time.

"--This speed isn't enough. To get past 19:00, we have to have 350 km/h, and to get to the end, we have to have 410 km/h."

"No way...I've heard that the test train could reach speeds of up to 397 km/h. How long that can be sustained, nobody knows. 410 km/h is unknown territory."

After 40 minutes, we will enter dangerous operation, and after an hour, we will have broken through the design limit--and at the end, unknown territory, huh?

If we don't make it back to Tokyo, the chance of *Kaboom* is large.

"Muto, Shiranui. Gather the Butei High students that are riding this train, then search for the bomb. Without decelerating, find the bomb and disarm it."

From the window of Hope 246, which had turned into Under Siege 2: Dark Territory, I could see the the town in the midst of dusk flow past like in a nightmare...

This, outside the window--if for example, the bomb was affixed to the bottom of the train car, it's all over. It's impossible to disarm that kind of thing.

Seeing Shiranui and Muto off, who were going to confirm that the cars behind didn't have any Butei High students in them, I---

I drew closer to the location in the rear of Car 16, where Aria and Riko were sitting.

"...Nn..."

Having subjected me to violent acts such as kicking and punching whenever I was together with Reki in Osaka, Aria turned her head back as if avoiding me, and as if trying to hold back something that she wanted to say, her cheeks were puffed out like a puffer fish.

The incident at that time...I wanted to explain a lot of things, but this wasn't the time for that.

First, I looked over Aria at Riko.

"Riko. You know what I want to say, right? This is the same modus operandi as yours."

With a voice that the other passengers couldn't hear, I said that as if interrogating her.

On Riko's face, the normal high school girl expression that she had had on her face up till just now flickered,

"We've been hit..."

Her eyes sharpening, she muttered those words.

April. During the "Butei Killer" incident which had led to the meeting between Riko and Aria and me, she was using these types of bombs. On my bicycle as well as the bus around Academy

Island...she had set something on those modes of transport, a bomb that would explode if one decelerated below a certain speed. An extremely terrifying, cruel planted explosive.

Although, the explosives that were planted on this train were even more horrifying.

Not only must it continue to run, but because, if the train doesn't continue to accelerate, the bomb will detonate.

"Cao Cao...has started moving again, huh, that fucking miser...!"

Gnashing her teeth, Riko stuck her hands between her knees, which were opened, moving them as if searching the seat.

"Cao...?"

Riko, her eyes in "Butei Killer" mode, turned towards Aria, who was frowning while asking that question.

"Cao Cao is--a person with a demonic mindset, despite being a child. She is I-U's Mechanic. In exchange for massive amounts of money, she modified torpedoes and ICBMs into transport devices... Kinji, the "Non-Stop" method which I used on your bicycle was also taught to me by Cao Cao. This is its improvement, "Hurry Up"--!"

Towards Riko, who had sweat trickling down her forehead--

"I-U's...explosive tactic instructor--is that it? Riko, you're her student, so you understand the basic structure of her explosives, right? Go look for the detonator and disarm it immediately."

Aria, still not looking in my direction, tugged on Riko's hand.

But, Riko didn't stand up from her seat, and she shook her head.

"No. I cannot move."

"Why not?"

"There's a pressure switch on this seat. I was careless, so I did not realize it. If I stand up, an explosive, planted somewhere, will detonate."

"...!"

Aria and me, speechless, looked under Riko's seat.

Added on to forbidden deceleration and forced acceleration...a human switch?

The first thing the enemy had done was seal Riko, who was the only one with any chance of being able to disarm the bomb.

She meticulously investigated our movements in advance, planting a trap on the seat.

In short, we--had, by our own free will, boarded the Shinkansen covered with the enemy's traps.

At this point, all we could do is laugh. At our own lack of vigilance.

"...An eye for an eye, 'Butei Killer'-san."

I, who had had a bomb planted under the seat of my bike, patted Riko on the shoulder with a thump,

"Riko, Cao Cao is a Chinese girl...a girl even younger than you. And the person who taught you those martial arts was her as well, right?"

-I continued.

Riko's big eyes, with those double-fold eyelids, looked up at me.

"How do you know, Kinji?"

"I was attacked as well. Yesterday, by this girl who uses vocaloids." The fact that she had a different name as well as Jeanne's statement: "There were no snipers in I-U," there was a point which caught my attention--

That Cao Cao is Koko. I can't be wrong.

Koko had...hidden from the members of I-U, who would become her enemies at some unknown point in time, her own skill in sniping.

However, Koko...She is proficient in martial arts, gunfights and sniping, as well as being a genius technician?

This time, it's so unbelievable that it makes me laugh.

They're all monsters. Those in I-U.

Saying something to Aria, who was, unreasonably, still angry, irked me, but since things had come to this, I had no choice.

I pulled on one of Aria's twin-tails, forcibly making her head face this way.

"Aria, calm down and listen to me. The offender who hijacked this Shinkansen is the person who attacked you with Aru＝Kata. Her name is Koko. Reki had a sniping battle with her--and she was heavily injured."

"...Reki was...!?"

Aside from the huge fight that they had gotten into on the stairs of the Butei High Station a few days before--

At the fact that Reki had lost, Aria's camellia eyes widened in surprise, forming large circles.

"Don't worry. She managed to hold on to her life. She was just in danger from losing massive amounts of blood over an hour."

"Why...why didn't you tell me earlier!"

"My cellphone was destroyed by Koko. By the time I could communicate again, you were out of range...No, it was painful enough that all communication with Aria was interrupted, but--in addition to that, it seems the information was also destroyed."

"Information...?"

"You didn't tell Riko the details either, did you?　Neither the appearance nor features of the opponent you tied with on the day of

'Water Tossing'"

Saying that, I could hear Aria's throat go "Uguu", and she went silent. It seemed that I had guessed right.

Just like how I had never told anyone about my loss to an underclassman, "Defeat from the Bottom"...Aria had experienced, "Draw from the Bottom" in a gunfight--and she was hiding the disgrace of drawing with Koko, who was younger than her.

It was because this noble ojou-san had pride twice that of a normal person.   Even though her height was half of a normal person's.

Koko--knew that fully well.

When Koko assaulted us, the first thing she did was--destroy our phones, our method of communication, and she used a false name as well, using Butei High's culture, the fact that people would hide the reality that they lost to their underclassmen...

She had prevented detailed information from being spread among us.

"Kinji, Aria, listen."

We turned towards Riko's voice, which was extremely tense.

"'Non-Stop' and 'Hurry Up'--Meter Bomb is started by wireless. Because, she usually plants explosives somewhere which already cannot be reached. But, jamming, congestion, out of signal range, weak electric field, hangup drop...wireless is lacking in reliability. Especially on high-speed vehicles like the Shinkansen, which is loaded with wireless components. I learned this from her. At those times, one must secure an escape route, riding the vehicle yourself. And, you have to see for yourself that your targets have boarded the vehicle, making sure what is planted inside the car starts up reliably. In short--"

Riko's eyes sparkled, as if confident in something.

"--the enemy is aboard this train."

At those words, Aria and I looked at each other. And at that moment.

---*Gangan, Gakin!*

The sound of metal clashing resounded several times, at the front of the car--the passengers who were gathered close to the cab of the train cried out while running back into the car.

(--!?)

At the front side of the car, while a scream rang out--as if swept away by some force, Shirayuki flew outwards, sprawling over the seats.

The salarymen, chess pieces in their hand, the gaudily dressed girl emitting a piercing shriek, as well as the passengers who had kept to their seats, stood up, running towards Car 15.

Threatening the people so as to chase them away, coming out from within the cab, its door broken from some large impact--

"--Koko!"

So in the end, she was riding the train...!?

"**Hello**, Kinchi. This is Riichi, isn't it."

Clothed in cultural Qing garments, Koko winked at me.

And--completely clashing with her elfin body, she raised a longsword akin to a hatchet.

The hilt of that sword wreathed with decorative fabric, engraved onto the blade was a picture of a slender dragon.

"This train will become your **coffin**! Kihi!"

Zccccchhhh----! The blade, brought down, sliced open the seats in front with ease.

That is a--**Lancet**

Called a Seiryuutou[4] in Japan, it's a broad, weight, single-edged Chinese sword.

I learned this in Assault, but the Seiryuutou is not like a Japanese long sword, which is sharp, meant to slice through organs and arteries. The blade is heavy so that it can cleave through flesh and bone, and it's a weapon that, if conceptualized, resembles an axe.

"I'll just play for 10 minutes, Koko has a promise for a date."

Looking over the shoulder of Koko, who had said that, on the driver's seat that I could see in the direction of the double doors was...

Was the female driver, half turning around to face this way, and there was nobody in the co-driver's seat. It appeared that Koko had kicked the co-driver out and had been sitting there.

Ueeeenn--Turning my head towards that crying noise, close to the middle of Car 16, unable to escape from danger yet, the children were crying, clinging to the pregnant lady.

They were all that was left of the normal passengers inside Car 16.

If I looked closer, the pregnant lady was clasping her large belly, sweating heavily.

Inside the midst of this panic, it seemed the stress had taken its toll on her body.

"--Shirayuki! Save her and her children!"

Shouting and dashing forward--drawing her sword was Aria.

Leaving Riko, who couldn't move, and I, who stood up reflexively, behind, Aria crossed her twin-blades, keeping them low, assuming a compact stance while charging down the narrow aisle.

As Shirayuki, crouched down while running down the aisle, brushed past Aria, they exchanged glances.

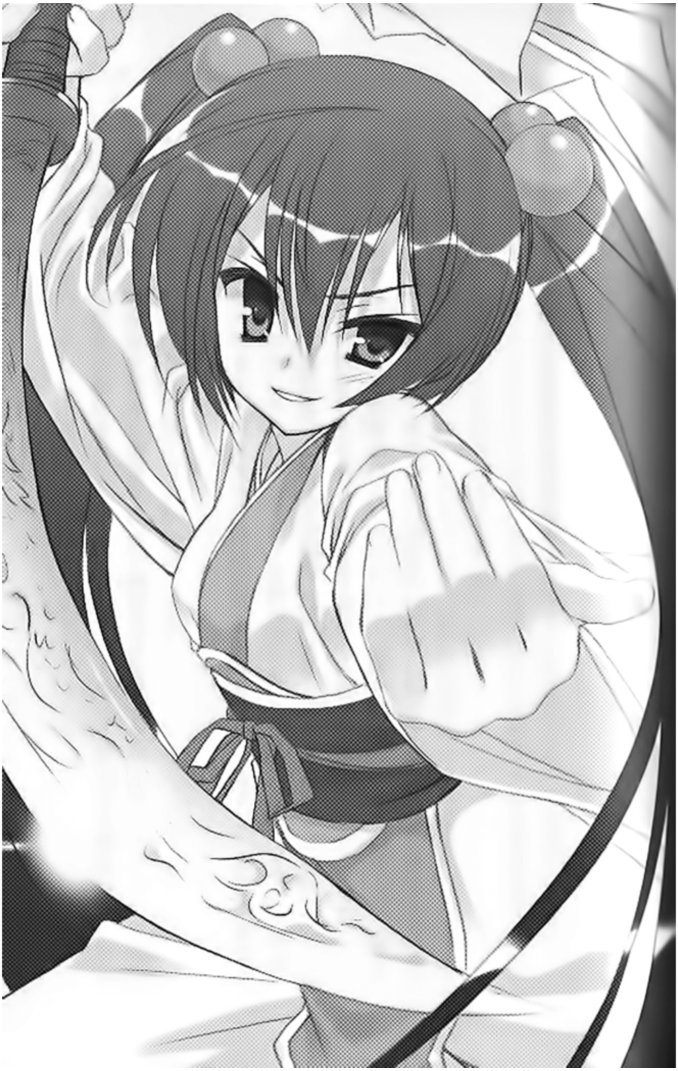
"--Nn!"

Using Shirayuki's hands, overlaid over each other, as a foothold, Aria jumped forward at an oblique angle.

Not slowing down at all, Aria flew over the back of the seat, *Tatatatata*-----!

With reflexes far beyond the norm, she thrust herself off the seat, using it like a stepping stone.

Opposing her, Koko span the Seiryuutou around once...



"**Come, come**, Sherlock the 4th."

Her hand, outstretched towards Aria, gestured at her.

Shirayuki helping the pregnant lady, I, while protecting the children, helped them to escape towards Car 15, and behind me--

Clank!

The sound of Aria's blades, held in such a way that they resembled a pair of enormous scissors, clashing against Koko's Seiryuutou rang out.

A Shinkansen is something alike to a steel box.

For the sake of not injuring oneself due to ricochets off the wall or ceiling, Aria and Koko weren't using guns.

Aria launched herself off the back of the seat, and Koko took the full impact head on, *Clash*.

The swords, clashing together at the heart of the blades, rolled over each other as if they were dancing, displacing each other. Twice. Three times.

The pink and black twin-tails fluttered through the air, outlining a swirl-like shape--

Aria. Koko. Aria. Koko.

Looking alike visually, the two people were turning round and round at a speed which dizzied.

It was as if it was a fighting game with 1P and 2P characters.

"You tricked me, you clown! The first time I faced you, you said your name was "Koko"--that was a false name! Cao Cao!"

"That's a name that Europeans mistakenly use. Sherlock of I-U called me by such a name, so Koko let everyone use it. **Koko**. The true pronunciation of the name in Wei!"

...

Is that how it is?

Just like how Riko had once said Holmes as "Ormès" using the French pronunciation, the pronunciation changes along with the changes in the language. So,that's why Jeanne, upon hearing the name "Koko", had no recollection of any such name.

If I gave it a little more thought, "**Sou Sou**" is how Japanese people read it as well.

--We're getting dragged into a global war, and we're having trouble over a name.

Having guided the children to Car 15, I-

"Shirayuki--I'll leave this woman to you. Go find out whether there's a doctor among the passengers. Aria and I, the two of us, will apprehend Koko."

-said that to Shirayuki, who was supporting the pregnant lady, having entered Car 15.

"Ye-yes! But, Kin-chan, be careful. I'm getting an abnormal feeling from that offender."

While whipping out my butterfly knife--

"Abnormal? Isn't that what happens all the time? So--it's normal."

As if saying that for myself to hear, I answered.

I returned to Car 16, and Riko, on the last rows of seats, was kneeling on the seat, just like a child.

Looking back, I could see Aria and Koko, close to the front of the car and drawing closer to the edge,

"--YOOOUUU!"

"Kihi!"

Their feet lashing out simultaneously, Aria and Koko went into a position where they kicked each other in the waist--and, with a smack, they separated.

In the next instant, Koko let go of the Seiryuutou, and, *Tan, Tatatata!*, she kicked the floor, Aria's knees, waist, and chest as if running vertically, showing off an acrobat-like maneuver--*Bccchhhhhh!*

The toes in the peony embroidered silk shoes thundered into Aria's jaw.

"Aria!"

While flipping open the butterfly knife in my hand, I ran up the aisle.

"---!"

Reeling backwards from the impact, Aria retreated several steps this way.

In that direction, Koko, her back turned towards the cab--cut through the air behind her with a backflip, her two long sleeves fluttering outwards like a fin.

And, from the midst of those sleeves...What the hell is that?

She took out something reminiscent of an atomizer.

"--**Explosive Bubble**!"

Shuu!

With that sound like the depression of an aerosol--If it hadn't been sparkling in the midst of the light of the car interior, I wouldn't have seen it--small soap bubbles, the size of rubber shavings, flew out towards Aria.

"--Aria, dodge it!"

Having seen that, Riko, panicked, shouted immediately.

"**Explosive Bubble** is a vapor explosive, I saw it in I-U! When the bubble bursts, the contents mix together with the oxygen in the air, and--it explodes!"

"!?"

Aria heard her, and from her feet, a loud crack ran out.

----*BOOOOOOOM*

From the soap bubbles that burst right in front of Aria's eyes, a violent shockwave and blinding light burst forth.

Amongst the seats in front, several of them were blown away--

"Kyaaa--!"

In the midst of the flurry of poker cards, which had been left on the seat, Aria flew outwards as if she had been hit by a car.

This light...! I remember this.

This is the same light that appeared at the end of the nighttime sniper battle between Koko and Reki, which caused her to be severely injured.

The scale was even bigger than that time--Reki was hit by this vapor explosive!?

"--Aria!"

In a rush, I caught Aria, who had been heavily impacted on her back and posterior cranial fossa.

Thank God, she didn't seem to have received any blatant trauma.

The moment right before Aria had been caught up in the explosion, her animal-like instincts had sensed the danger, and she reflexively did a backstep.

Thanks to that, she escaped a direct hit, and it seemed that she hadn't received any serious injures like Reki had.

However, she received a considerable amount of damage from the impact. Aria's consciousness was fuzzy, and her knees were trembling. Aria was in a state where she could not stand up on her own. She had let go of her swords as well.

"Uu...Uuu!"

For what I assumed was to clear her head, Aria shook her head left and right, her pink twin-tails swinging around as if beating a drum.

In that direction, 10 meters away from us, Koko, a broad smile on her face--

"Kihihi, now it's **even**!"

Like the immortal zombies who appeared in that movie from a while ago, "Reigen Doushi", her hands were stuck straight out.

With that posture, sticking her hands out, *Rattle Rattle*. Shaking her sleeves again, from inside...Nunchucks...? No. Wrong.

She took out two mini rockets!

Bringing the head of the two rockets together with a clink, Koko separated the two, bringing them left and right respectively.

Between the two tips, a wire stretched outwards. An appearance exactly like nunchucks.

"**--Double Rocket Restriction**"

With a sharp jet noise, the two rockets, flying parallel to one another, passed by on the left and right of Aria and I--

The wire, stretched out between them, pressed down upon the area below Aria's flat chest.

"Uuu!?"

The rocket, having fixed the wire upon Aria's body, started flying around us in an absurd manner.

"Ah...ah!"

"Woo...oah...!"

In a heartbeat, Aria and I were bound by the wire, completely paralyzed.

Twirling around our arms, torso, and legs, the rockets-*Clank!*

-crackling, automatically severed the wires as their fuel was completely depleted, and they dropped to the floor, rolling.

"Kyaa!?"

Stepping towards the other side, Aria completely lost her balance--

And along with me, who had been tightly restricted by the wire as well, she hit the floor with a thud.

Uu...thanks to the fact that our legs were bound, w-we couldn't stand...!

Added to that, from the shock of falling down...because I could not put any strength into my arms, which were fixed to my waist, I had let go of my knife.

The knife had slid under the seats, and I had no way of reaching my hands out. As such, I could not retrieve it.

Literally...my hands and legs were tied. In just that one instant...!
"Uu...Uu..Fueh...Cao Cao...!"

Seeing Aria and I get hit, Riko's hands were rubbing her eyes, which were gradually leaking out tears.

"...BIEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEH! Wasn't Riko your partner in E~~~U!? Aren't we class~~~mates!? Save Riko, only save Rikoooooo! BIEEEEEEEEH!"

S-so loud.

...Bloody Riko. Despite the fact that she told us so much just now.

When it starts to look like we're losing, she stabs us in the back.

Rather, just now, you said "Save only Riko," right? Is she really our friend?

"Mine Riko--stop faking your tears! Crying wins the sympathy of only boys!"

Point! Pointed at by Koko, Riko-

"Tch."

-clicked her tongue, and she stopped crying, making a face at Koko.

Koko--inserted her hands into each of her sleeves, holding them together in front of her chest, and with a composed expression, she walked forward.

And, arriving at a place where she was looking down on Aria, Koko started intently at her face.

"Fuuun. So, this is Aria. When I saw her photo, I certainly thought that she was as cute as Koko, but seeing her in person, Koko is actually cuter. Kihi."

"Koko!"

Even though she could not reach out with her arms or legs, Aria was baring her fighting spirit as well as her canines.

"That hairstyle! Before, I told you to get rid of it, right!? That's the same hairstyle as mine!"

"I don't remember hearing that, puh, puh! Whether it's **Ranban** or I-U's Ignatius, they want girls like Aria. If I use this hairstyle, I'll make a lot of money."

"Ignatius...? You're one of the remnants of I-U...!?"

"**Wrong**! From the beginning, I've been one of the members of **Ranban**! I-U was purely business!"

I didn't really understand if she had met with Aria before, but Koko, saying some strange things...was squatting like a frog, her hands against the floor, bringing her mouth to Aria's ear,

"Rather--you! Watch how you address me! Koko has been a princess for generations!'

She shouted with a high-pitched voice on par with Aria's.

I-I didn't think that princesses squatted like frogs.

Whoosh Standing up, Koko--

"--***Aria the scarlet ammo***."

Hidan no Aria.

The name that was passed down to Aria from Sherlock in I-U was uttered.

"Everything is your fault. By destroying I-U, you broke the power balance between all the associations, groups and organizations in the world. A time of chaos will begin."

Koko was looking down at us haughtily.

Like an empress looking down at captured criminals.

"You have pleased the Hihiirokane. This too is the start of chaos. Hihiirokane and Ririirokane are opposed to each other. Sensing the mood of the Hihiirokane, Ririirokane has been harboring the anger of a century. Its anger has scattered invisible particles, rendering the ability of all the *ability users* in the world unstable."

"*Ability users*...are...?"

The back of her head pressed against the bottom of my chin, Aria asked with a tone which seemed to convey that she was completely ignorant.

Not completely clear on the details of ability users, I too had nothing but a question mark appear in my mind, but--

Thinking about the series of events that had been revolving around me recently, I noticed something.

Before, when I had sought information about Reki...having cooled the can of hot coffee that I had bought by mistake, Jeanne had said it. "...Recently, my magic hasn't been very stable."

And at Kyoto, Kazayuki had said something about the Mikos' power having debilitated.

Were all those linked to the Irokane?

--Koko, the corners of her eyes streaked with red eyeshadow, looked down at me, who was frowning.

"From now on, ability users are useless. At this kind of time, the value of marksmen increases."

Clank Clank. Koko rapped her fingertips against my head.

"Kinchi is different from an *ability user*, but he's a good piece that has a secretly high battle ability. Ignatius, Daioh, Ulus, everybody wants Kinchi."

Everyone...wants me...?

I don't understand what kind of delusional words she's saying, but...

It seems that I've become rather famous in the world of the other side.

Despite the fact that I'm so inconspicuous at school.

"The first to reach out for Kinchi was Ulus. Ririirokane gave a direct order to the princess, and she took action against Kinchi. However, Koko will snatch Kinchi from her side."

As if genuinely happy, Koko jumped up and down on the spot.

"Koko will also take Ulus' Reki. She's an outstanding sniper, she's good for use in assassinations, and she's good for selling too. I will take Aria as well. Hihiirokane can be sold for a lot."

As if operating an abacus inside her head, Koko smiled wickedly--

"A chaotic world is good for business. This Shinkansen-jacking is also a side business deal. Earlier, Koko demanded a 30,000,000,000,000 yuan ransom from the Japanese government. It would be nice if they paid, but if they don't--KABOOM!"

Twintails jumping up to the extent that it seemed they were flying, Koko shouted those words with a high-pitched voice.

"I'll blow this train into pieces, demonstrating **Explosive Bubble**. Kihi."

"**Explosive Bubble**--the exploding bubbles from just now, huh...!"

Just having been blown back by that vapor explosive, Aria glared up at Koko.

It seemed that...Koko had planted that on the train too. According to what she had just said.

"The **Explosive Bubble** from just now was around 1cc of explosives. This train is loaded with 1 cubic meter of it."

Said Koko, lightly.

"Wai...that's over the top!"

Kneeling on the seat, Riko' s expression conveyed, 'That's seriously dangerous!'.

I too--was speechless.

1 cubic meter. Whether it's a bubble or a balloon, a container which holds that much gas cannot be hid inside a train. It's definitely a lie. But, if it isn't--

According to my calculations, the explosive force would be 10000 times that of the explosion earlier.

This Shinkansen will be reduced to ash. All its passengers and the surrounding structures as well.

"**Explosive Bubble** is an invisible explosive. It is a work of art, something which no matter where it is hidden, will not be found by anyone. If it explodes with enough splendor, it will be ordered from around the world. Koko will become rich, and then I can buy my place as **Ranban**'s empress."

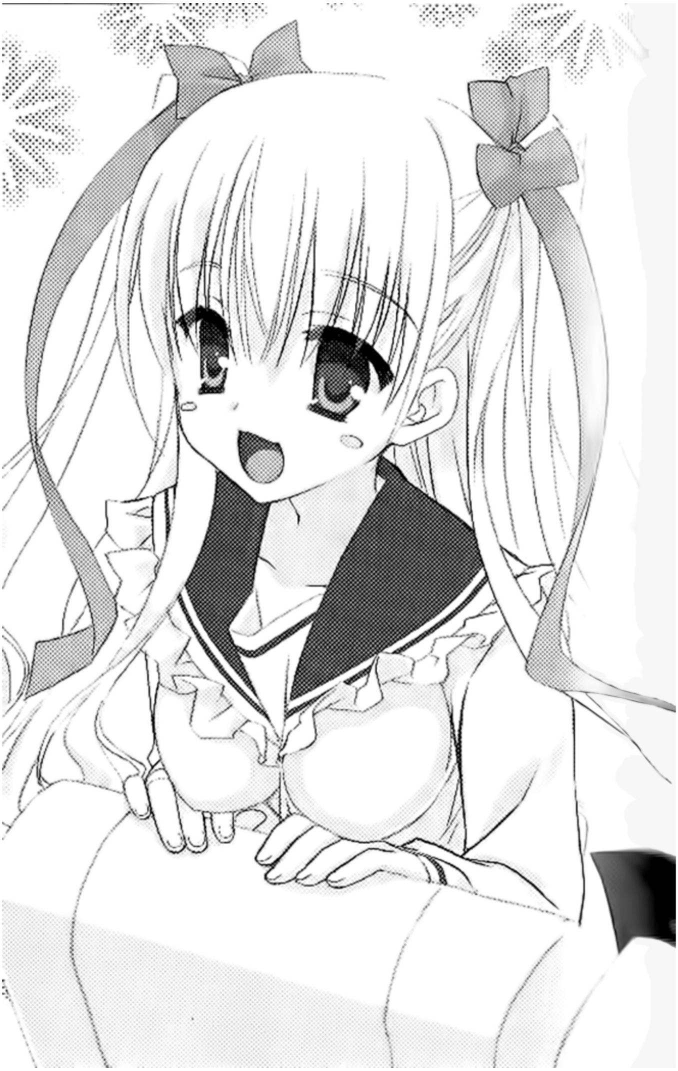
Ranban--from her tone, that's the name of the organization that Koko belongs to.

Most likely, it's an outlaw group based in China. While being a member of it, she also entered I-U as a black merchant...huh? That's judging from everything she's said up till now.

"Kinchi, Reki, I'm bringing you to Hong Kong, **Ranban**'s city. When we're there, become Koko's pieces and move for her. Aria will be imprisoned until a buyer arrives. Kihihihi!"

Towards Koko, who was laughing like that--

"Cao Cao. Wh-what about Riko?"



Clutching the back of the seat with both her hands, Riko interrupted from the side.

"Wouldn't you like some Riko with that? Riko is cute and strong, hiring me won't be a mistake!"

..."Wouldn't you like some Riko with that," you said.

Are you McDonald's fries?

"Mine Riko. Your power notwithstanding, your personality is difficult. Are you going to change?"

Having said that to Koko, whose eyes were suspicious, Riko, 'UnUnUnUnUnUnUnUn'

-with a desperate expression, nodded several times.

"--If you swear loyalty to **Ranban**, I'll consider it."

"I love **Ranban**! **Ranban** Banzai! Kinji, Aria! Become a member of **Ranban** with Riko! Ranban's city is a paradise with lakes of wine and forests of meat, it's a super, ultra, amazing, wonderful place! You can eat as many authentic peach buns as you like!"

"...Authentic...pea..."

Still fallen down, Aria let loose a voice as if she had lost all sense of self, but-

"Pea...hey, Riko! What kind of speedy betrayal is that!?"

Grar!' -once again, she bared her teeth at Riko.

In a position where it looked like I was embracing Aria, I--

"It looks like negotiations have broken down, Koko. I--don't want to become your underling. Even though I look like this now, I'm a Butei."

In the first place, I have no intention of becoming part of one of those terrorist-like groups...if I do, it's the end.

Not only will I be lynched by the OB in the Butei High all over the world, as well as those demonic teachers, I'll be sentenced to death under the threefold punishment that is applied to Butei. Compared to that, dying a clean death here is still better.

"--A good general will say that in the beginning. But, all humans have desires. China is a vast country, full of things and people. A country where everything exists. If you consult Wei's books on tactics, when the enemy general is a young man, with the use of women, he can become your own subject. I'll gather one hundred of the women you like. Beautiful women, beautiful girls, big, small, I'll give you many, many, many. You can decide on this one, or that one, whichever one. Ufuun."

At Koko's words--*Twist, Glare!*

Aria twisted her neck to its limit, afterward, staring at me out of the corner of her eye.

Wh-why're you mad at me? Completely unreasonable. You're always like this.

"I-it's unfortunate, but...that has the opposite effect on me, I think."

I cannot explain in more detail in front of Aria...yet I replied with that.

"Also, I told Reki this too, but I'm not anything like a general. I'm just a normal, male high school student."

"--Kinchi, you need to know yourself. You are a special person. Special people will be hindered by those that are normal. Don't fit with the surface world. Rather than that, it's better to live an extravagant life in the world below."

Twinge--A flicker of pain ran through my chest.

In the midst of Nii-san's battle with I-U, he disappeared from the surface world--

Remembering that incident, my words became tinged with rage.

"I...I won't become like that. I--will walk a normal person's road."

"For a boy whose very existence is abnormal, what are you saying?"

Once again crouching like a frog, Koko brought her hand closer to my face.

Brush. Her black twin-tails carrying the scent of sugared chestnuts, brushed past my face.

"Kinchi, you and Koko are the same breed. Humans who have wondrous potential will definitely be picked out."

Clank----!

At that moment, the Shinkansen shook again, the scenery flowing past the window had sped up.

----[Current speed: 180 km/h]----

"Uuu...Lord--allow me closer--*Sob*, fueh...to you--"

I seemed to be hearing some sort of hymn, sung in a crying voice.

In the direction of the double-doors, opened, it seemed that the female driver was singing.

Apparently Christian, her voice seemed to express that her will was reaching its limit.

"Aiyayayayaya, I've talked for so long. Koko is going to get ready for her date."

Koko stamped on the ground where she was standing, *Twist*.

Grabbing hold of Aria and I, still bound, *Brush, Brush*.

At the front of Car 16--further forward than the frontmost seats, we were pulled through the automatic door.

"Wh...what do you plan to do to us!?"

Koko, letting go of Aria, who was being dragged, crying out, and I, took a carabiner hook from out of her sleeves, and she attached it to the wire binding us.

"You cannot do anything anymore. Neither do you need to know anything."

Apparently opened up in advance was a door in the ceiling--it looked like a person could barely squeeze through. Probably used for maintenance.--Continuing up the stairs towards it, she exited the car.

Seeing the wire stretched out away from us and the hook attached to it, Aria...

"She...plans to string us up like a yoyo, bringing us somewhere."

"Probably China. I don't have a passport though."

Not even bothering to wonder why she would use a yoyo as an example, I heaved a deep sigh.

"This isn't the time to joke around...! Nn...! I'm going to wriggle out...Uuunnn...Nnnng!"

Wriggle Wriggle! Aria twisted her petite shoulders, squirming around.

The wire was twisted around us several times, but it didn't seem as if Aria could move at all.

While pressing her shoulder against my chest, she twisted her body, twisted...not being able to wriggle out, she struggled.

At that moment, *Clank*--!

Once again, because the Shinkansen had sped up, the car shook as it had been struck.

"Uwah!?"

At the impact, *Roll.*

Aria, who had been struggling, twisted around, facing this way.

He...Hey.

Until just now, we were in a position where I was stuck against Aria's back, but now, we were directly facing each other, in a pose as if we were glued together. All the while, bound by the wire.

"Wa, wah...!"

Looking up this way, Aria's face was just under my chin.

"...tc...!"

Because the wire was also pressed against the back of my head, I had no choice but to stare directly at Aria's face from an extremely close distance.

Aria didn't seem to be able to lower her head either, and her large camellia eyes were looking at me--

"F! F! Fffff!"

Gyuui.

Gyuiiiiii!

Her speed-blushing technique of always was demonstrated.

As expected of the inventor. Bright red was achieved three times quicker than Connect's Nakasorachi Misaki.

"F! F!"

...What's "F"? "F".

"F, F, face backwards! Yo-your face is close! Close, clooseeee!"

Aria pressed her forehead against my face, trying to force me to look backwards.

Gui...Guiiiiii!

O-ouch!

"He-hey! Hu-human's can't turn just their necks to face backwards! Stop it!"

If my neck continues to twist like this until it's turned 180 degrees, I'll become like that cursed girl that appeared in that famous horror movie from years ago, "The Exorcist"!

"Ca...Calm down!"

While shouting, in the instant which I twisted my head back to Aria's direction, *Muchi!*

Apparently still trying to press against me, Aria, on my cheek-

--accidentally planted a kiss.

"!"

My mind--seemed to have registered that as "getting hit", and as such, I was fine in terms of Hysteria Mode, but Aria...seemed to have completely registered that as, "I KISSED HIM!"

"~~~~~~

Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!

Apparently, she was screaming that out, but...her scream was too high pitched, and it seemed that it had exceeded the hearing capability of human beings.

Baring her canines, from Aria'a mouth, all I could hear was a very slight *Kiiin!*

Th-that's amazing.

Aria. Right now, you're emitting supersonic waves.

"FJKLD@#$*(&#$! SDOIFJO*#&$*(&#$! Pue! $LKJ#*&@#(*&FDLKJ!"

Starting to shout with some kind of inhuman language, *SQUEEEEEEEEEZE!*

Like a rabbit trying to escape out of someone's hands, she went wild.

A-amazing strength...! What the hell is this?

"Nnnnn! Nnn, nnn, nnnnn!"

Brush Brush, Brush, Brush!

As if exceeding some sort of limiter, Aria, going half-berserk and struggling...O-oh...?

Centimeter by centimeter, the wire is starting to move up our body!?

(Sh-she did it...!)

From a catastrophe to a blessing.

Because of the wire, I could not reach out with my legs or feet, but thanks to Aria's stupid strength in this time of crisis, I managed to wriggle out.

If I looked closer, her long twin-tails were...like the ears of a green foxtail clutched in a hand, apparently having the ability to help slide out of the wire restricting the body. How lucky.

In the instant that I thought that...something unlucky began to happen to my body.

Because Aria, still stuck against me, was inching up and up, escaping, my mouth and nose were...pressed against Aria's slender neck.

(...ch...!)

A-at this kind of time.

I remembered about Nii-san's...which is to say, Kana's strange words which I had heard.

Something like: "A girl's neck is the place where a girl's pheromones are most exuded, you know."

And I was in a position where my nose, which is to say my face, was pressed against Aria's neck.

I-I don't know whether or not these are pheromones, but...

This is Aria's bittersweet scent.

This is like some sort of perfumed fragrance. Like a flower, like a fruit--rather, a lovely fragrance which was almost addictive. It's always with Aria.

At this place, with that lingering aroma, Aria was continually moving up, escaping. The parts which brushed past by my face were: a petite shoulder, a collarbone, slowing going down her body...which means, hey...! Be-below this...wai, this is bad! THIS IS BAD!

"Aria...wait! WAIT!"

Next, rubbing up against me, who was shouting...rubbing up against my cheek was the pure white skin exposed in the space at the collar of her sailor uniform.

A-against my neck, already, Aria's...br-breasts were pressing against it...!

"Nnn! Uuu!"

Not listening to my warnings, Aria, *Brush Brush Brush Brush Brush!*

Centimeter by centimeter, continuing to slide upwards---

(......Uu......!)

---!

At last, I--

-had my face buried in Aria's breasts.

In April, ever since I had pressed against them in the PE Warehouse, that sensation was transmitted to my face once again.

It was rather pitiful that they hadn't grown at all in the past half year, but this soft climax was--the same as that of that time. While it was slight, it was definitely there. It existed.

Fitting her short stature and childish face, small, lovely breasts.

It was across her blouse, but I, my nose and mouth completely blocked...*Bch, BchBch!*

As if mirroring the moment where one gives up from sparring, my hand tapped Aria's thighs.

".....? ...! M...! Mikkyaaaaaaaaa!"

She screamed like a wild cat, and furthermore, *Brush Brush Brush Brush Brush!*

Her body continued sliding up.

"...!"

My breathing blocked by the sailor uniform, and not able to stand the pain, I went the opposite way as Aria--forcing my body to escape downwards.

My face brushed against Aria's slender waist, Aria's hip, Aria's skirt, one after another.

Aria, Aria, a full course of Aria.

"Ki-Kinji! Th-th-that was...damn it! Idiot! Ah, ah, aaaahh! Hole! I'll blast, a hole, stop, stop it!"

I no longer understood where my head was pressing against Aria, who was shouting in agony with that anime-voice--*Squish.* When I thought that my head had finally been extricated from wherever, I was in the space between Aria's thighs.

It had become a position where it was as if I was shouldering those lovely, slender, white thighs.

And, the fortune in the misfortune was--finally. My hands were free.

"...Aria. Just hold on a little bit longer. It'll be over soon."

Somewhat able to breathe, I pushed up against Aria's lithe legs--and struggling between her knees, wreathed in black stockings, then between her calves, I extricated myself from the wire.

Alright--I finally managed to get out.

...And now...

Aah, I understand.

I don't need to check it. My own blood flow.

Because, I had fully appreciated a girl's entire body, from head to toe.

I closed my eyes for a very long moment--and when I opened them--

Without even looking in a mirror, I understood that the look in my eyes was completely different from that of just now.

Quickly, I flicked my eyes over to the door of the bathroom, which I hadn't entered when I tried to wash my face.

Leaving Aria to stand up, I grasped the handle, but...the door didn't open.

This doesn't feel as if the lock was broken. It was stuck together as if it had been glued.

Looking through the window---the faucet of the sink, ventilation fan, electrical socket---in other words, the holes inside the room were blocked with some transparent silicon-like substance.

--I see. 1 cubic meter. That's how it is.

That sealed washroom--was completely filled with that vapor explosive, **Explosive Bubble**

If I pushed my face in to look closer, inside the window, stuck against a corner, was something I thought to be the detonator, an extremely miniature piece of C4. If this is detonated wirelessly, breaking the window--if the airseal was broken...

Kaboom--right?

(While it's a shame...this can't be disarmed.)

Turning my head and looking down at my feet, Aria was...*Drip, Drip*...

Like a girl who had been subjected to horrible things by some horrible man, she was sprawled on the floor, sobbing.

"...Papa, Mama, God, forgive me...this is...just my slave running wild...I, didn't, a-al-allow any of this...!"

I knelt by Aria, who was muttering something I didn't understand to herself.

And, respectfully, I brushed off the wires that were still clinging to her quivering shoulders and back.

"--Ki-Kinji!"

Thump!

Jumping upwards into a sitting position, Aria grabbed hold of my collar.

"I-I won't forgive you! For just now...For ju-just now, I won't forgive you! Ta-take respo--"

I lightly reached out towards Aria, who was shouting with teary eyes--

"Mm, it's fine if you don't forgive me."

Gently, I straightened those disordered twin-tails.

"Because, next time, I will do it with your consent. It's a promise."

"That's right! Things that I don't allow are--wait, hu-huh, t-th-that's not it! That isn't a matter of me allowing it or not...!"

Towards Aria, who had been completely drawn in by me in a mere 5 seconds, towards her cheek, I stretched out my right hand.

From that small, dainty cheek, touching it yet not touching it-- I was at that distance. At a distance where, merely the heat of my hand was transmitted to her cheek.

Aria, releasing an *Uu*, trembled as if it tingled.

"Look. As long as I don't earn your consent--I cannot even touch you with one finger. Do you understand? Aria's words have that much power. Something that can be transmitted only to me--a magical power."

"Ma-magic? Wh-wh-what are you saying?"

"On the other hand, if you tell me 'to do'--then, I will do anything for you, no matter what it may be. That too is a magic that only Aria can use. Think about what you can use it to make me do."

"???......。 ......。 ......! ! ! !!!"

First was confusion, and then, for a moment, she seemed to be trying to think about it, and from then on, suddenly starting to panic, Aria--

WaveWaveWaveWaveWave! WaveWaveWaveWaveWave!

Haha. I wonder what she was thinking about. Speechless, she started waving her hands back and forth.

"I await my orders. As for receiving your orders, I have prepared for it--to fight, to arrest Koko. To save the hundreds of passengers that are aboard this train--those orders."

---*Ha*--

I understood that Aria had regained control of herself.

"You...changed, didn't you."

"That is all that has happened. If I had not changed, it would have been disrespectful towards you."

Hey, hey, me.

Hysteria Mode's trigger--arousal--don't say anything that might be a hint.

Well, the child, Aria's eyes were going, "???", so it seems like it's fine.

If Sherlock Holmes the First's power of deduction had been passed down to this child, then what I had said just now would have been rather dangerous.

"I...I'm not going to give you an order."

Aria stood up and she turned away from me, towards the opened door in the roof--

She looked up at the night sky, visible beyond it, traveling at 190 km/h.

"Butei Charter article 6. Reflect by yourself, act by yourself--a slave that only listens to people's orders...is not needed. The you as of now may say these kinds of strange things, but you are a Butei that can aid me as a partner."

Partner.

When those of the bloodline of Holmes fight together with their partner, their real power is released.

In short, with this, she is equipped. Aria, with the me in Hysteria Mode.

Koko. The us from now on will be strong.

"Also, you--normally don't listen to me. So, I won't give you something like an order."

--*Feh* In response to Aria, who had turned back, sticking her tongue out at me, I laughed wryly.

Entering Car 15, there was Shirayuki, bringing a doctor to the pregnant lady.

It seemed that the woman was about to give birth, pressing down on her stomach and having broken into a cold sweat...but, the rather old female doctor started providing medical care with a calm, professional air.

This was--pretty lucky, that this kind of doctor was on board.

"Kinji! There aren't any other Butei!"

"The nine on Cars 15 and 16 are all that we have, Tohyama-kun."

Raising my head to that voice, Mutou and Shiranui were zig-zagging through the crowd of people, returning.

The two people, having elbowed their way through the 400 meter round trip on the train, were a little out of breath.

"We didn't find the bomb." "We managed to report to the police, but..." "We didn't manage to find the offender either."

From behind the two, Takane, Hayakawa, Anesaki--the me in Hysteria Mode could remember girls' names with ease--the three girls who had been having bad delusions about Shiranui and me came back as well.

"We already searched everywhere. It's time to enter battle."

I put my hand on Shirayuki's back, gesturing at Shiranui, Mutou and the Connect girls.

Using the space between Cars 15 and 16 as our meeting room, I--

First, because I told them about the vapor explosive that was planted in the washroom at the front of Car 16, the fight with the offender and how she had escaped to the roof, and how the enemy's power was extremely high,

"We are the only ones aboard this train that are armed. To prepare for the enemy coming from anywhere, Takane, Hayakawa, Anesaki, you three will be spread throughout Cars 1, 4, and 5 and Cars 11, and 12, Shirayuki, please protect this location. Shiranui's--anti-terrorist training is very valuable. I want you to take charge of the middle, Cars 7, and 8."

Swiftly, I told them how each member would be assigned.

"Also, while you're waiting, can the people with Takane please contact Butei High, the Metropolitan Police, as well as the Railroad Public Safety Branch, to figure out how to disarm the bomb."

"--Kinji. What do I do?"

Not having been told a position, Muto asked me that question.

"The Shinkansen's driver is already in shock. Muto, please drive in place of her. 10 km/h acceleration every 3 minutes...requires fine handling but, can you do it?"

"Definitely. If it's Logi, a first year can do it."

"The bomb is right behind the driver's seat. There's nowhere to run."

I said that, as if testing his resolve,

"Will *you* be able to run?"

Muto showed me his white teeth, responding with a broad smile.

Somehow, it seems it'll be alright.

"--Aria, let's go. Let's arrest Koko for infractions of the armaments law and suspicion of imprisonment. We should teach that kid that it's the time for children to go home."

Flexing my fingers and looking at the watch--I saw that it was 18:22.

Until Tokyo, we have one hour. From now on, we are forced to be at a speed where safe-driving is impossible.

In surprise, Aria was looking up at me, who was displaying such leadership in the midst of an emergency, but...when our eyes met, she let loose a small, "Ah," averting them,

"Ye-yeah...!"

Taking a tone as if she was my little sister, she nodded at me obediently.

3rd Ammo: The Third Quadra

The three girls from Connect had several simple single-earphone-type incams, and taking them, we established communication, sharing the same frequency.

Afterward, confirming that we had reached our respective positions...first, a message from Shiranui was transmitted through the incam.

"...Tohyama-kun. On Car 7, there are several TV staff of some location aboard and they have cameras. They understand that this is an incident, so it seems that all along, they have been using the train's wireless LAN to broadcast."

"Broadcast...in this situation?"

"Yes, they seem to be happy. They were able to be right at a scoop."

Really...They have no sense of reality.

Despite the fact that everyone might die in a heartbeat.

"...Leave them. Reporting is a freedom."

Scooping up the butterfly knife which I had dropped just now, that was all I said.

Because of the incident with Nii-san, I hate the media, but--in any case, I cannot stop the information leak. I can just pray that this doesn't lead to something bad.

--At the front of the train, next to me,

"Kinji, use your heel hook too."

Saying that, Aria put her white sneakers back on.

To prepare for a case where one has unstable footing, Butei normally carry a titanium-alloy hook around with them.

On the belt buckle or at the bottom of the holster, the concealed metallic components have the ability to fit together and change into several different forms for several different purposes, much like a transformer robot toy.

For the sake of not falling off the Shinkansen, Aria had attached those to her shoes, choosing spikes.

"During the bus-jacking, we had used wires attached to the roof as our support, but this time, we'll be in close quarters combat. There's the chance that the wire will be severed."

"--Correct decision."

And, while I too was attaching the spikes to my shoes...

Having finished her preparations earlier, Aria turned her back this way, going through a series of stretching exercises.

"You know. In Osaka, the thing with you and Reki--"

After a while, as if for the purpose of breaking the awkward silence, Aria interjected.

"I don't really mind. For intruding too much on your private matters, I apologize."

This is...a tone which shows that you really do mind.

Apparently, she's still angry that I was together with Reki throughout the field trip.

"Aria. It probably made you misunderstand, but...at that time, I was under Reki's Sniper Restriction. Reki is silent, so she didn't say much, but it seems that she was trying to protect me."

"Fuun..."

Having said that, Aria turned her head, seeming to be half satisfied, half suspicious.

"--Well, it's fine. I was waiting around there anyways. Waiting on my own."

"Waiting? For what?"

"It doesn't matter, right? Alright, this conversation is over. Ah, anyways, I'm so unlucky. Even though my birthday is so close, I've been dragged into this incident."

A glance flickering my way, Aria stamped lightly, seeming to be testing out the spikes.

"Really, I'm so unfortunate. It's my birthday next week."

...Why did she say it twice. Birthday, birthday. At least, I'll memorize it.

Thinking about that, I met her eyes, and Aria's expression seemed a little urgent,

"Ah, u-um. Kinji. Where's your hometown?"

She seemed to be deliberately leading the conversation away from that topic.

I don't really understand, but--I'll just go along with her.

"Sugamo. My grandparents are living there."

"Sugamo...? Were you planning to go there with this Shinkansen? If so, it's a shame."

Saying that, it seemed that Aria wasn't very familiar with Japanese geography.

"Sugamo is in the city."

"In the city...Then, why do you live in a dormitory? Wouldn't it be fine to commute to school?"

"--Well, there are a lot of reasons."

Fixing my shoes, I faced Aria without explaining in detail.

So, the atmosphere turned to "Ready"--

Aria was patting her cheeks, mustering her fighting spirit, showing a cute movement.

Alright--from now on, it's time to fight. As if telling herself that.

It's just a theory that when a two-man cell hasn't fought together for a long time, they should have some idle chatter in order to synchronize, but we had just finished with that. We had done it arbitrarily in the conversation just now.

"Let's go."

Immediately reaching out for the stairs, Aria's petite hand was--

-because I was on top, covered by my hand as if being embraced.

"Wh-what, all of a sudden. Hand, hand, hand."

Apparently weak against surprise attacks, Aria's face turned red in an instant, and I reached out with my little finger, flipping down her skirt.

"Only when going up stairs and ladders, ladies first is an exception."

The reason I was going to climb the ladder before Aria was...also for the sake of making sure that I would not have a hole blasted through me afterward, when Aria would notice the spatial relationship between myself and her skirt, but--

-it was also for the reason that, my mind in Hysteria Mode had had an uneasy prediction.

If this prediction turned out to fit the reality, the first person to exit would be in danger.

Leaving Aria, holding her skirt with both hands, her face having become red, below, I--

-extended my torso out from the rectangular exit leading out to the roof into the outside of the train, which had become completely dark.

"...!"

--*Whoosh*--

While I was doing that, an enormous amount of wind pressure assaulted my back.

The Shinkansen was operating at over 200 km/h--the wind-flow flowing over the roof was far more violent than I had imagined.

The sound of my necktie and bulletproof uniform being buffeted by the wind rang out.

(But, it isn't to the extent where it's impossible to stand up.)

Fighting against the wind, I relied on my spikes to stand up.

Koko was--there.

Having already moved to the anterior of Car 16, at the only pantograph there--a metallic component stemming from the aerial wiring above the car which supplies electrical energy to the vehicle--in front of it, a large installation had been set up, and it was flashing as if giving off some sort of signal. Alright. Her back was facing this way.

(...We haven't been noticed.)

Having bent over for the sake of reducing air resistance, at my feet--

Clank.

The sound of the lid of the door I had just exited slamming shut rang out.

Rumble Rumble Thud! The sound of Aria, apparently having been trying to come up, falling to the floor resounded.

As I went "Tch", turning around--

Bang! Bang Bang!

I released bullets from the Beretta in my right hand.

Clank! Clank----!

Approaching me from the back, another Koko used the broad Seiryuutou as a shield, deflecting the bullets.

"Kihi--!"

Creak!

The spikes on her feet groaning, Koko dropped to all floors in that position.

"**Sister Pao! Kinji came!**"

"--**Sister Mei! Hold tight!**"

The two Kokos, at the front and back of the car yelled to each other in Chinese--

Having noticed the sound of the gunshots, the Koko at the back of the car drew an SMG, an Uzi.

Taking that opportunity, I retreated from the Koko who had been called Meimei, the one holding the Seiryuutou, reaching approximately the middle of the car.

The position was such that I was caught exactly in between the two Koko's at my front and back.

(...As I had predicted.)

This Koko and Koko. They looked exactly the same, something like twins, right?

I had deduced that in advance, and ended up not being cut down--

-because my mind in Hysteria Mode had seen through this trick from two pieces of information.

The first piece of information is--the **Explosive Bubble** bubbles that had blown Aria away.

That was the same thing as the light that had injured Reki in the night-fight.

But, the range of that dispersal device, the atomizer, is short.

It isn't able to attack a sniper that is at least two kilometers away.

Which is to say, at that time, some other person had covered Reki with that **Explosive Bubble**.

The Koko that is strong in martial arts--Meimei was the offender.

Creeping in under the distraction of the hunting dogs, Meimei released that vapor explosive.

And, the second piece of information is--the conversation with Aria in the car.

From that conversation, I realized that the second Koko's appearance was exactly the same as the first's.

Aria had gotten angry over the fact that Koko looked like her, and apparently, on the day of Water Tossing, during their Aru=Kata battle, she had said, "I told you to get rid of it!"

But, Koko had said that she had no memory of such a thing.

Rather, she had said that this was only the first time that she had met Aria in person.

In other words, the person who had engaged in Aru=Kata with Aria at Butei High was another Koko. With the exact same appearance, one more Koko--and that was the person that was on the back end of the car right now, **Paonyang**, right?

This trick...it's obvious to say it's obvious.

Koko had called herself "The Warrior of Ten-Thousand Techniques", but a single person cannot do everything.

Martial arts. Marksmanship. The Kokos had divided up their specializations, acting as **Ten-Thousand Arms**--"The Warrior of

Ten-Thousand Techniques".

"Koko, Koko--It's time for your punishment."

While looking at the Kokos on the left and right of me, one after the another, I drew the Desert Eagle that was stored by my chest with my left hand.

Desert Eagle. The gun of my father's legacy can also be used by the me in Hysteria Mode.

Beretta in my right hand. Desert Eagle in my left hand.

Doubla, dual-wielding.

Now that I think about it, in terms of blades, I also have a butterfly knife and a scramasax.

I'm in the middle of a field trip, so I don't have many bullets. If I run out of ammo, against the two Kokos...I can do nothing but use twin-blades.

--Aria. Riko.

I'll be borrowing your specialty for a moment.

Tohyama Kinji Version--Quadra of Mimicry.

"Kinchi, you...went into Hysteria Mode, didn't you. How?"

Apparently noticing that my aura was different from earlier, the Koko holding a blade--Meimei glared at me.

"Did you use Aria? Did you use Aria who looks like Koko?"

Paonyang, holding her submachine gun ready, turned red with a surprised expression.

They had realized that, with Aria, who was very alike to themselves, my Hysteria Mode--had been triggered by arousal. Realizing that, it seemed that for some reason, their alertness had increased.

...How impolite. Because I had had past experiences with going into Hysteria Mode with various women, you said it in a loud voice, but it's not like I can just do it with anybody, you know?

"Be-be careful, **Sister Mei**. There's a lot to be careful of."

"**Yes**, **Sister Pao**. No matter how I look at it...it is impossible to capture HSS without injury."

The two people, saying that as if playing on stereo--their eyes, already very slanted, narrowed even more.

A stronger killing intent than before radiated from my left and right.

Almost numbing, it was a true killing intent--

--They finally got serious, huh?

Until now, it seemed that Koko had been showing themselves as relaxed in order to catch the enemy off guard.

Haha. As expected of the teacher, the martial style is extremely similar to the *someone* who wears Goth Loli uniforms.

"Kinji, it's me. After 10 seconds, we're accelerating. Don't fall off."

From the driver's seat, Muto communicated over the incam.

"What happened, Kinji! The door isn't opening!"

I heard Aria's high-pitched voice, which was almost as if it was trying to mask Muto's.

"I'm in the midst of battle. There are 2 people exactly like Aria on top of the train."

Answering with only that, I didn't say anything that might urge Aria to support.

The me as of now is in Hysteria Mode. I don't want to see girls in danger.

"Don't hold back, **Sister Mei**. It doesn't matter if you kill him."

"**Yes**. It doesn't matter if I kill him--!"

Thud---! Readying her Seiryuutou, Koko; Meimei ran towards me from the direction of advancement.

--Quick. Aided by the 250 km/h tailwind, she shortened the distance in a heartbeat.

And, with a stance reminiscent of baseball's head-first sliding, she charged this way.

"--!"

Thud!

The Seiryuutou, the force of her entire body behind it, swung at my feet, and I jumped lightly, avoiding it.

I wanted to jump upwards normally, but I was immediately buffeted backwards by the air pressure,--

PaPaPaPaPa!

The Koko holding a gun fired her Uzi from behind me.

Twisting around in the air, I--fired the same amount of bullets from my Beretta - Kinji Model, defending with Billiard Shot.

The enemy's bullets all exploded into sparks in the air--

"-Ha!"

This time, as if stretching out from the roof, Meimei, doing a handstand, immediately kicked up at me.

I had no choice, kicking girls is rather painful for me, but--

My feet and Koko's feet met each other midair--

And, I leaped off her feet as if they were a jumping platform.

Meimei and the me in Hysteria Mode. I jumped with the combined power of two. High. Jumping over the flowing power lines and the hanger of the power pole holding them up, swiftly flying upwards for two, three meters.

From midair, using the Desert Eagle--boasting three times the stopping power of a Beretta, I fired at Meimei's Seiryuutou.

--*BANG!*

With the recoil akin to that of a mortar, I hung in the air for a moment.

As expected of the automatic strongest-class Desert Eagle. This power isn't to be laughed at.

Clank! Deflected, the Seiryuutou was torn out of Meimei's hands, sliding backwards on the top of the Shinkansen.

At the anterior of the car, just as Paonyang picked it up--*Clank*.

Still in the air, below my feet, the Shinkansen accelerated.

This speed--260 km/h--!

Paonyang embedded the Seiryuutou into the back of the Shinkansen, and I could see that she was using it as a pole to retain her balance.

"Yaiyaiya!"

Having lost her Seiryuutou, Meimei knelt to the ground while screaming that out, fishing two large fans from out of her sleeves.

(Battle-fan--huh? This is the first time I've come up against it.)

From the air, I looked down at the fans, dyed crimson and gold, widening.

I had seen Shirayuki use battle-function fans before, but they had been made out of bamboo and paper.

However, Meimei's Chinese fans were made of metal. The edge, gleaming in the moonlight, was a blade.

Running, Koko twisted her entire body, jumping upwards, trying to dice me like a mixer--

And against that edge, *Chnk, Chnk!*

I kicked off of it with my spikes, dancing into the air once again.

And once more, I fired the Desert Eagle in midair.

---*BANG! ZNG!*

Meimei immediately overlaid the metal fans, somewhat deflecting the .50AE bullet.

However, the Desert Eagle's stopping power was cheat-level. Destroying the two fans, it forced Meimei towards the front of the car.

Once again hanging in the air through the recoil, I brushed the aerial cables in the air, modifying my trajectory--

Finally touching the roof of the Shinkansen again, I stretched my arms outward, pointing the Doubla at the Koko sisters.

The light from Hamamatsu station flowed past us like innumerable tracer bullets.

I--

This battle is no longer in desolate territory.

An Aru=Kata gunfight at 260 km/h. This isn't something one can see in even Kung Fu movies.

It's a shame that Hong Kong's famous director, John Woo's camera isn't here.

--*SSSHHHHAAAAAAAAA*

Going onto a large curve, the Shinkansen leaned to the left as it tried to retain its bank angle.

For the sake of preventing the derailment of high-speed trains, they will take the curve like an airplane, banking.

The chassis moved with centrifugal force, and we were standing slanted along with the train.

Her back against the slanted ground beneath her, Meimei, having thrown away her broken fans, bent over--*Ba*

The flat of her hand standing erect, she stretched out her hands to retain her balance, her opened knees dropped till they reached right angles as she bent her hips.

And, *Thud!*

Just like what Riko had did to Haimaki at Butei High station, she kicked up with her right leg.

"As expected, Kinchi. You really do have good skills. If it were possible, I don't want to kill you."

Immediately pointing her right hand at me, Meimei shook her sleeves--*Clank!*

She took something small out of her sleeve, holding it in her hand.

I can't see it...What is it. What did she take out?

I have a bad feeling.

That is something--like a finishing move.

Staying alert, from the opposite side of Meimei--the sign of a gunshot was--!

"!"

The moment I dropped down--*PaPaPaPaPaPa!* The sound of gunshots rang out.

The bullets that Paonyang, walking this way, had fired with her Uzi whooshed over my head.

(...Danger!)

The stray bullets that I had just dodged were heading straight for Meimei, in front.

Thinking that, the me in Hysteria Mode readied the stance for Billiard Shot in an instant, but--

All the stray bullets passed through the air just left and right of Meimei. They didn't hit her.

Paonyang--as the Koko that specializes in marksmanship, had shot such that even if she missed me, she would not hit her sister.

With an Uzi, she sprayed countless of bullets in that instant--with a submachine gun.

Amazing marksmanship. The level of Aria, Kana, and I.

Does someone like that still remain in this world?

No...That was not all I should be surprised at.

Meimei--another Koko, was completely at ease.

She trusted that Paonyang's bullets would not hit her. As if she understood that she would not shoot herself.

(They're alteregoistic. These sisters...!)

I leaped upwards, kneeling on one knee on top of the car.

I tried to raise my Beretta to counterattack, but--

While switching the long-magazine of the Uzi, *ThudThudThud*, Paonyang kicked my head and gun while running over me. Towards Meimei.

Zuzaaaa, Paonyang, doing a headfirst slide at the end of the Shinkansen--

-at Meimei's feet, she stayed lying down like that. As if protecting herself from whatever was about to happen.

"--!"

My eyes caught sight of the equipment that Meimei had whipped out from the palm of her hand.

"Time for the fireworks."

That is--

-the thing which fires the vapor explosive bubbles, an atomizer!

"--**Explosive Bubble Dragon Chain**!"

Together with that scream, the **Explosive Bubble** that she released windward wasn't very visible in my dark field of vision--there were many of them.

Zig-zagging side by side, they rushed towards me like a miniature dragon.

(Damn...!)

I can't--dodge that.

A bomb's area of effect is normally an expanding "sphere". Even if its diameter is the extent of a vehicle, one can dodge to the front or back.

However--multiple explosions, stretched out in a row, encompassing the whole of the top of the train, cannot be dodged.

I'll have to take it. If I don't prepare myself to any degree of damage, then...!

As I went "Tch", crossing my arms over my head, protecting it--

At Meimei's side--if one were to call it a dragon, the first **Explosive Bubble** popped at the tail.

BOOMBOOMBOOMBOOMBOOMBOOMBOOM---!

The explosion set off the next bubble, and then the next bubble--the explosions continued in a chain. As if a slender Chinese Dragon was blazing into flame.

"--!"

I put strength into my legs, trying to withstand the impact, but--
Clank!

As if a raging dragon had just thundered into my body, I was blown towards the back of the train.

The impact and heat wave stopped my breathing, and for a second, my consciousness--went blank.

Even so, without releasing the guns on my left and right, standing up on the roof, in my ears--

"Meimei! Get Kinji off! **Sister Juu** came to assist! She came earlier than planned!"

-could hear Koko's voice saying that.

Looking up towards the sky, from the air behind me,
Barabarabarabara...

As if brushing past the stars between the clouds, I could see a helicopter approaching.

(Now...Reinforcements for the enemy are coming now...!?)

Earlier, Koko had said, "Promise for a date".

It seemed that that was meeting up and extraction with the companion that was riding this helicopter.

Not even leaving me enough time to frown, Meimei fished a small gourd out of her sleeves, which were being buffeted by the wind--

Guii-----! Thud.

With a pose as if gazing up into the sky, she faced straight up, emptying the contents in one gulp, throwing it away.

"---**Drunken Eight Trigrams Palm**---"

Sway. In a moment, Meimei, looking as if she had lost her balance--

TapTapTapTapTap! While her twin-tails were fluttering like ribbons in gymnastics, she closed in on me with frontal somersaults and cartwheels.

"--!?"

My reaction towards those erratic movements, which I had seen for the very first time, was late.

Movements like stepping on the gourd that she had thrown away and tripping mixed in, I could not keep Meimei in my sights.

Wh-what kind of movement is that? Drinking alcohol and then fighting...that's impossible!

"JYAAAOOH!"

Thump.

Meimei extended her legs, clinging to my waist, just as I was barely standing.

"Kuh...!"

No, not only her legs.

Shh--snaking around my neck was a twin-tail.

This is what I had been subjected to on the day of "Water Tossing", the irregular choke. That front...!

"ShanShiKeiKeiBa!"

In a heartbeat, Koko was holding her own twin-tails, *Guiii!*

She threw herself backwards.

"...!"

The same as the day of the opening ceremony, my windpipe and carotid artery was clamped.

I grabbed hold of Koko's twin-tails as if we were playing tug of war, trying to resist, but--

-added to Koko's two arms, she was using the power of her back to pull the tails on her left and right completely tight.

I-I can't...I'm losing my strength...!

"Kihihi! From the beginning, you can't win against the princess of the middle of the world! Peaceful idiot **Japanese!**"

This is bad...my consciousness is starting to fade...

...I'm done. My mind in Hysteria Mode told me that calmly.

This is my loss. Once again.

The first reason being, this was two against one.

Moreover, those two could completely synchronize their actions exhibiting perfect co-operation.

Teamwork increases the power of individuals.

Yes, I had--been subjected to the figurative opposite of what we had always done to I-U's assassins.

(This too is...divine retribution...?)

The second reason for my loss was...Hysteria Mode. That weak-point had been exposed.

I did not want to hurt girls, without letting Aria join the battle, my battle ability dropped, and even the enemy, Koko, I tried to protect, creating an opening.

Naive. Too naive.

I...really am a peaceful idiot Japanese person.

I smiled a wry smile, tainted with self-derision, but even the muscles in my face...I could no longer put strength into them.

Blackout----when blood no longer flows to the brain, the optic nerves cease their function--at the denouement of that feeling, as I lost consciousness--

---*BSSHHHHH! BSHH!*

A jarring impact ran into my body from Meimei's twin-tails.

"Auoh!?"

Clink, bent backwards, Meimei dropped towards my feet, the choking maneuver was--

-in an instant, released.

The bundle of silky hair was still wrapped around my hand.

Meimei did a backwards somersault, and her hair had--become short.

The twin-tails on the left and right had been severed. Right at the foundations.

Still contorted, I saw that, at the bottom of my field of vision, two new bullet holes had opened up on the roof of the Shinkansen.

(Ju-just now was...a snipe!?)

And the instant I noticed,

Bang...Bang...!

I heard the sound of distant gunshots.

This--sound.

I hadn't forgotten it.

Time and time again, this sound had been heard as if engraving itself into my consciousness.

The sound of a ...Dragunov sniper rifle!

"Different--that helicopter is different from **Sister Ju**'s! Who is it!"

Along with that gunshot, like a distant crack of a thunder, the sound of Paonyang's panicked voice.

From a swaying helicopter, shooting the roots of a person's twin-tails while they're grappling with somebody on top of a moving Shinkansen, severing two of them together. Furthermore, with a famous rifle, yet nevertheless anachronistic, an SVD.

Able to do something like that, a superhuman sniper....I know nobody besides one person.

"--Reki...!"

The helicopter, following the Shinkansen, was an OH-1.

Inside the Hotogi shrine's garage, Kawasaki Heavy Industry's high-speed helicopter.

From the opened hatch--

Still bandaged in various places around her body, Reki had stuck her body out, holding her sniper rifle in place.

And with a speed which overwhelmed surprise, the muzzle of the Dragunov flashed.

--*BSSSSHHH!*

The supersonic 7.62mm x 54R impacted the ground by Meimei's left and right feet, looking as if it was brushing past them.

"**Ah!**"

Letting loose a truncated scream, Meimei pressed against her heel--*Thump*. She fell upon the ground there.

This is...a manner of falling which suggests that while there was no blood loss, her Achilles tendon had been grazed.

Reki. As always, you are a goddess of sniping. Despite being heavily injured.

With just one bullet, you crippled Meimei's ability to stand.

"--!"

Unable to stay in place, Meimei was buffeted by the wind--

She slid towards the back of the car.

Hssh, Somewhat able to hold on to the signalling device at the foundation of the pantograph, Meimei stayed in that position, hiding herself in the shadow of the installation. She seemed to be trying to protect herself from Reki's follow-up.

"Kin-chan...um, hello? Sorry for interrupting while you're fighting."

A message entered the incam as I was still stunned.

Panicked for whatever reason, Shirayuki's voice.

"What's wrong?"

"From Hotogi's Makieda-san--from the chauffeur-san, there's a phone call."

Ph-phone call?

Frowning, in my ears, *Click, Beep*, I heard what seemed to be the sound of Shirayuki's cellphone linking with the incam.

"--Tohyama-sama, my deepest apologies. This is Hotogi's Makieda. Right now...I am flying over the anterior of Hope 246."

...This voice.

This is the driver which brought us to the Hotogi Shrine by car.

From that high-speed helicopter, she was talking with Shirayuki?

"Wh-what is it...!"

"This is--our disgrace. The young megumi miko who were watching TV were talking, and Reki-sama, having heard them...took her gun, and kicking Kazayuki off, who tried to take this helicopter to come to Shirayuki-sama's aid, she ordered the pilot, myself, to fly her out."

Looking at the anterior of the vehicle, the helicopter had already descended to the point where it was nearly touching the Shinkansen.

In the co-pilot's seat of the OH-1, extending half her body out of the hatch, Reki--

-while her short hair was being beat down upon by the wind, she was looking down on the very back of the train.

And, giving some sort of order to the pilot's seat of the helicopter...

"--no, Reki-sama, we have already exceeded the vehicular speed limit. If we go any faster...the chassis won't be able to take it...!"

I heard Makieda-san's voice, apparently in response to Reki--

-and even so, Reki pointed her Dragunov at Makieda-san, and I could see her giving Makieda-san some sort of order.

...Barabarabarabarabarabarabara...!

The OH-1 descended even lower while accelerating. At the edge of the very back of the Shinkansen.

Do you plan to board...Reki!?

Impossible. Stop it.

You're injured.

Don't fight!

"Kinji! Pull back the helicopter! --in front of us is a tunnel!"

Reaching over the incam, Aria, apparently having heard the conversation between Hotogi's chauffeur and I, said as if screaming.

Looking back at our direction of advancement, while the vehicle was delineating the large curve, it was heading straight for a tunnel.

Above the tunnel was a mountain.

At this rate--the helicopter will crash right into it!

"Kinji! We're accelerating in another 10 seconds! We're exceeding 300!"

Muto's voice delivered the worst of the situation.

"Makieda-san, rise!"

"...!"

Apparently concentrating on the complex operation under the limit-breaking speed, there was no response from the helicopter.

"**Reki!** You can't hit anything except birds--**Northern Barbarian**!"

From the front of the vehicle, with the Uzi that Paonyang was holding by her hip--*PaPaPaPaPaPa!*

Although it was outside the gun's effective range, she let loose a barrage at the helicopter.

Without taking notice of that, Reki placed her toes on the handle of the helicopter, hanging upside down out of the hatch--she readied her Dragunov.

Pa! Thinking whether the muzzle had flashed--*BSSSH!*

"Kyuu!"

Paonynang's Uzi was torn out of her hands, falling down towards the track.

The next instant, no longer able to bear the strain, the helicopter tried to avoid the fast approaching mountain, rising--

Feeling that, Reki, *Flutter*, launched herself off the helicopter, into mid-air.

Zan!

At the very back of the Shinkansen, Reki pierced the roof with her bayonet, clinging on to it.

Her amber eyes immediately faced towards this direction--towards the Kokos and I.

--*WHOOOSSH*--

Staying at a speed of 300 km/h, the Shinkansen entered the tunnel--

--*Ban!*

In the midst of the darkness, the airflow around us intensified in a mere moment.

(Uu...!)

The air pressure changing in a heartbeat, my lungs seemed to rip apart.

Buffeted by the vortex of wind, I had no choice but to press myself against the back of the Shinkansen.

Grinding my teeth, straining my ears in the midst of the ever-present roar.

Listening to the operational noise of Hope Number 246, echoing in the tunnel--for whether the sound of the helicopter's explosion was mixed in.

Still tense, my ears searched through the ripping noise.

But...it was alright.

The OH-1 [Ninja] was a helicopter that was as maneuverable as its nickname boasted.

I had only been shown it in a video by Muto, but in case of emergency, it could perform an Immelmann turn.

The helicopter performed a maneuver in reaction to death, avoiding the slope of the mountain, escaping danger.

(Makieda-san--as expected of the chauffeur that armed Miko are entrusted with.)

Above my head, the lights lighting up the tunnel at regular intervals flowed past one by one like a meteor shower.

In that scene, as if out of a movie, at the very back of the train, around 400 meters away, was Reki.

Reki was somewhat standing, and step by step, she advanced. Facing this way.

--No.

Don't come, Reki! You'll die!

You are injured. Fighting under such torturous conditions, your body can't take it..!

"**Re-Ki**...!"

Clatter! Turning my head to that sound, I could see that, while holding a new Uzi that she had taken out of her sleeves, Paonyang was slowly crawling towards the sloped head of the Shinkansen, which was taking the streamline-curve.

Hiding her body against that slope--when Reki comes into her gun's range, she plans to take the attack with her gun.

"Shira...yuki...!"

Not able to breathe properly in the midst of the wind pressure, pressed on the ear which had the incam inserted into it, shouting.

"Kin-chan! Are you alright!?"

"I'm...alright! Rather than that, Reki has...boarded, from the helicopter! She has, severe injuries, can't let her fight...!"

"Re-Reki-san is...on the train!?"

Pa---!

With that sound, the Shinkansen shot out of the tunnel.

While Reki's skirt was fluttering as if it was about to be torn off, she was already crossing from the car at the very back to the next car.

--There's no choice. Telling her to stop won't stop Reki.

Finally able to breathe normally, I decided to put the final measure that I had been thinking of secretly all this time into action.

"Shirayuki, for the sake of not allowing Reki to fight, for the sake of saving the passengers--there is something a request for you."

"A request for me...?"

"The lead car of the Shinkansen, this Car 16...sever it. With your katana."

"...Eh...!"

"In truth, for the sake of that, I had you stay there. The vapor explosive is in the frontmost car--Car 16. Because the passengers are gathered in Cars 15 and below, if you sever it, casualties will be kept to a minimum."

"But, Kin-chan...will be left at the car with the enemy and the bomb...!"

Worried about me, Shirayuki didn't seem to be willing to immediately accept cutting the Shinkansen apart.

However, it doesn't seem as if I'll have enough time to persuade her.

This train was passing by Shizuoka station, which was desolate after the people had evacuated.

I can't help it. I don't really want to do this, but...I'll put Hysteria Mode's techniques into action.

This is a technique which Nii-san, which is to say Kana, had showed me before, but--

In this kind of time, I can probably do it.

"Shirayuki."

Tone of voice; this kind of feeling is good.

Calm down, Kinji. If you calm down, then you should be able to do it.

"Shirayuki. Are you listening? Shirayuki."

With a voice that was a little deeper, I started speaking as if appealing directly to Shirayuki's heart.

"Ye-yes."

"Ever since before, Shirayuki has known me. Shirayuki, who knows me more deeply than anybody else--wants to say that the burden of this battle is too heavy for me? If that's so, then that truly is unexpected."

"Th-that's..."

"I thought that Shirayuki understood me, yet--was I wrong? Shirayuki."

Mixed with the sweetness of Hysteria Mode, my voice, Shirayuki, Shirayuki, called out that name, weaving it into my words.

"N-no, that's..."

Shirayuki's attitude immediately became as obedient as norm...no, changed into something even more obedient than normal.

Alright, alright, I managed to perform it well.

This is something that has been passed down through the Tohyama family, "Voice Captivation"--a type of hypnotism.

Recently, this was proven scientifically by Seiyuu-training schools, but people are weak against the opposite gender's voice when a special tone and breathing method is blended in.

The Tohyama bloodline, which has Hysteria Mode, has already refined this to an art, passing it down.

According to that piece of knowledge, if one continually responds to girls with their own name, gently, sweetly whispering into their ear...it appears that their mind will gradually become more and more hazy, and they will leave any decision to boys.

"Shirayuki. The severing of the cars--you'll do it for me, right? This is something that only Shirayuki can do."

Controlling my impatience, I continued whispering to Shirayuki.

Because Shirayuki has an incam inserted directly into her ear,

I can expect that it's able to replicate the effect of the contact-distance of whispering.

"Kin-chan...you can...win?"

"Yes. Please leave the enemy and the bomb to us. I'll leave the passengers to Shirayuki and the others. You said that--recently, your Kidoujutsu has been unstable, but...you can cut it?"

"Ye-yes. If I use all my strength, then...definitely!"

At Shirayuki's voice, a wave of relief washed over me.

It seems that she'll do this job for me.

"Kin-chan, I'm cutting it. I'll definitely sever it well!"

"Ye-yeah."

It seemed that she was the type to be easily affected by hypnotism;

it felt as if Shirayuki had been completely motivated.

"I'll cut it! Cut! Cut! For the sake of Kin-chan-sama, I'll cut it in half!"

No-now that I think about it...Nii-san had warned me about this. "Voice Captivation" is prohibited from being frequently used and abused.

I have no idea of how one could exploit it, but indeed, if I use this often, then it seems as if it'd be horrible.

It seemed that, in an instant, inside Shirayuki, something like 'loyalty' for me had been amplified...

The future is extremely uneasy.

"--Aria."

I returned my voice to normal, talking to Aria through the incam.

"Aria--please retreat to Car 15. You have Kanae-san's trial. You no longer have the time to be preoccupied with this stupid incident."

"N-no way! I...!"

"Kinji, I heard, you know? It seems that I've been put in the Detention group."

Just as it seemed that Aria was about to starts shouting, Muto's voice interrupted.

"Muto. I'm sorry. That things became like this."

"Heh. I don't care. It's been my dream ever since I was a kid to drive a Shinkansen. With that granted, I feel like it's fine even if I die."

Saying that, Muto's voice was really trustworthy.

Even though it was half-desperate at the same time.

"--Muto. There's also a pantograph at the back of the leading car. If we receive electricity from there, can we keep going even while severed?"

"I'm changing the settings to that right now."

As expected of Muto. He's quick at his job.

No wonder he's an honor student in Logi.

"If we sever the cars--what will happen to the cars in the back?"

"Don't worry. The Shinkansen was designed so that each car can run on its own. Because the New Automatic Train Control System is cut, it can be stopped through manual operation. The crying driver from earlier can do it for us, right?"

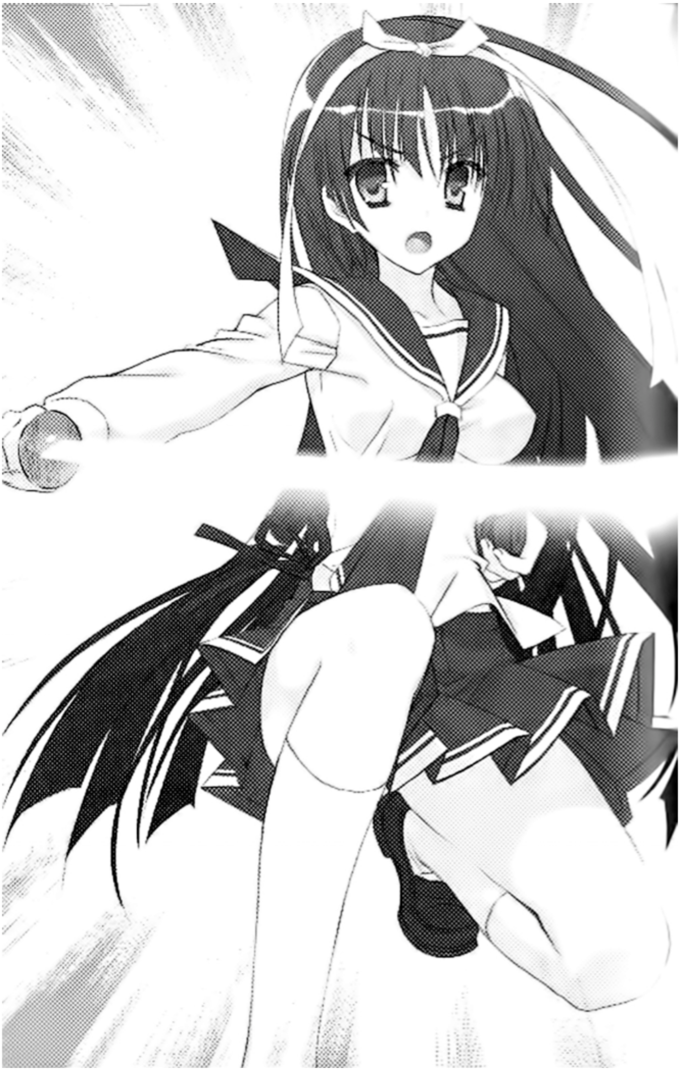
While listening to Muto's words, I watched the back end of the vehicle, and Reki had already crossed over the middle of the train.

"Shirayuki, do it, do it for me."

"Yes...! Kin-chan, may the God of battle bless you...!"

Apparently having been conserving her power till now, Shirayuki took a deep breath--

"--Hotogi Soutenryuu--Hihihotogikami - Zankan--!"[5]



In the wake of that voice, *Shing!*, the sound of a blade being drawn, reminiscent of a bell, rang out.

The next instant--without a sound, at the end of the front-most car, the linking portion, light burst forth all around it.

As if several burners were being used, a scarlet light.

"Kya...!"

Meimei drew her neck in at the sudden glare, and immediately after--

Clank...that heavy sound rang out, and Car 15 started drawing back.

"...!"

--Well done; is all that can be said.

The cars had been severed. With that one strike.

Having seen that, Reki started running this way as if trying to push the wind out of her path.

"--Reki! Stop!"

As I shouted, the severed car behind us got farther and farther.

1 meter, 3 meters, 5 meters--

Alright, it was no longer a distance that Reki could cross while fighting against the wind.

The forward-most car, having become solitary--seemed to have become unstable aerodynamically, and its shaking intensified.

In my shaking vision, Shirayuki, visible from the incision at Car 15--

Like Hishikawa Moronobu's Ukiyo-e "Beauty Looking Back", her back was facing this way.

Apparently and probably from some kind of iai technique was the flash just now, and she appeared to be still in the regretful stance which had caused it.

"Kin, chan...!"

Shirayuki--the blade in her hand, *Clank*, dropped to her knees.

Her breathing ragged, with her exhausted face, she turned to look this way painfully.

Shirayuki, you did well.

Thanks to you, all the passengers are saved.

Reki as well. With this, she can leave the battlefield--with that, Reki, who I looked at again--

"...?"

While sprinting across the roof of Car 15, which had been severed from this one, she took something out of her breast pocket.

My eyes in Hysteria Mode caught sight of it.

(Butei Bullet--!)

That color is, Grenade. Triggering a huge explosion, it is a miniature vaporized fuel explosive.

What do you plan on doing.

Reki--!

"Minamoto no Yoshitsune...Eight Ship Leap...!"

Still collapsed, Meimei said something, pale--

Reki was coming.

Whilst spinning on the spot, *Sparkle*--in the air, behind her, she released the Butei Bullet.

And once again, sprinting forth with all her strength, she faced this way.

--*BAAAAAAAAAAAAANGGGGGGGGG!!*

Manually detonated, the Grenade spun into a crimson vortex of flame behind Reki.

The shockwave blew away the wind from the front, acting as an reverse hurricane.

--Reki, while being blown away by the blast--

-cradled the Dragunov, and her skirt seemingly being torn to pieces--she traveled the gap between the two cars.

And--*Thud!*, she tumbled onto the brink of the leading car.

"--Reki!"

Rolling off the the edge, delineating a curve, Reki, her face unchanging, pierced the roof with her bayonet.

And, clinging onto the stock of her bayonet, her entire weight hanging upon it, she used it as a stepping stone, *Paki*---, and just as the bayonet snapped, she somehow managed to climb onto the roof.

That body, wrapped in bandages here and there, seemed to have had its wounds opened from the impact just now, and they were soaked in blood.

Why...are you so reckless. Reki.

White smoke streaming from her burning bandages and shoes, Reki, standing on top of the train, as expressionless as always...

Meimei, and even Paonyang, stared up at her in shock.

...Reki.

Robot Reki.

Do you not know even terror?

You'll die if you do that...!

"Why...did you run this way!"

I shouted from the center of the car.

"The reason I ran?"

Removing her burning shoes and socks and tossing them aside, Reki stood barefoot on the back of the Shinkansen--

"--because, Kinji-san too ran for me. On that night, from the mountain, cradling me."

Her method of speaking completely emotionless, she answered with that.

My ears in Hysteria Mode caught that voice even through the wind.

"...Reki..."

After the sniper battle at Hieizan...I thought that Reki had fainted, but it seemed that she was slightly conscious.

Because I faltered in my words out of embarrassment, Reki turned towards Paonyang, who was looking at the situation from the front of the vehicle.

"Also, I made an oath. "I oath to become a single bullet, bringing destruction upon those who wish to harm my lord."--That."

Click.

As if readying a blade, Reki pointed the Dragunov at Meimei.

"Koko of Ranban. Just once, I will give you the chance to surrender. The number of people in battle is already two against one. You have no chance of winning. Disarm the bomb and stop the train."

From behind Reki--

"It's three against one."

Shh, Aria climbed up from the cut section of the Shinkansen.

"Aria...!"

In response to Aria, her jet-black and silver-white Governments drawn, my cheek twitched.

Aria. Although I told her to retreat from this car earlier, it seemed she had stayed.

Reki--continued to keep her back facing Aria,

"Aria-san. Please return to the interior of the car. I believe I told you not to approach Kinji-san."

While her bandages, slightly unraveled, and her short hair was being buffeted by the wind, she spoke a warning.

"...As for the wounded, return to the hospital."

Twin-tails being blown about, Aria answered as if arguing.

"Aria-san is the one that is supposed to retreat."

"That's you, right?"

"It is Aria-san."

"It's you!"

He-hey. Both of you.

Don't fight even here.

The fact is, the two of you being here together in this situation is reality. There's no helping it.

At that point, I thought outside the box. A place to return to, a road, none of that is here.

However--if we are fighting together, if we do not work together, it will be dangerous.

For a Butei and Butei, if they are able to cooperate well, 1 + 1 will equal 3 or even 4. However, if there is disagreement between them, 1 + 1 will not even equal 2.

The worst case is, they will drag upon each other, turning it into a negative number.

In the past, Shirayuki and Riko...were opposed to Aria, but if it was an emergency, they would cooperate and fight.

They were not people who would remain stubborn in even times of trouble.

--However, Reki cannot.

Her killing intent, as if the number of enemies had increased by one, was released at Aria, who was behind her.

Aria too, being Aria, was in a mood where she was ready to point her guns at Reki.

This won't do. These two...will fight. At this rate.

I frowned--and just as I clutched my Desert Eagle, nearly out of bullets, and the Beretta--

--*Zzaaa*--

Once again, the Shinkansen entered a tunnel, and the vehicular noise as well as darkness enveloped us.

However, the tunnel this time was short, and in a few seconds, the vehicle exited.

After exiting the tunnel--a glaring light shone down upon the train.

This light...what is it? Squinting while I looked up into the air--

...Barabarabarabarabara...

A news helicopter, making that noise, was flying in the air at a rather high altitude. There were many of them. It seemed as if they were waiting for this train, Hope 246.

This light was the searchlights that the helicopters were focusing on one point.

The bloody media. From a distance where they would not be affected by an explosion, they were going to be bystanders from above, huh?

"Koko. It's over. Throw down your weapons and raise your hands."

Within the searchlights, which seemed to be carving out a path in the darkness--

I pointed the Desert Eagle, shining brightly, and the Beretta at Paonyang and Meimei respectively.

However...even with that, Paonyang's eyes had not lost their will to fight. The same went for Meimei, collapsed on the ground.

Why? Why won't they wave a white flag?

The Kokos are--

(...Waiting for something...!?)

At the exact moment that my mind in Hysteria Mode realized that...

The sound of the hovering news helicopters changed slightly.

Looking back at the sky, one of them--Eurocopter's AS365, approached from the anterior of the vehicle. Reckless. There's a bomb set on this train. Which location is this TV station from?

--No, wrong...!

That was disguised as a news helicopter--

"Aria! Reki! --Hostile vehicle!"

Right before I shouted, my eyes in Hysteria Mode had caught sight of the pilot.

A girl shouldering a sniper rifle.

She is, she too is, Koko!

Exactly the same as the Kokos that are here, the third Koko.

"Rather than twins, they were triplets...!?"

I went "Tch", glaring at the AS365.

This is one kind of infiltration method.

Even if we chase, even if we knock them down, the next Koko will appear.

"Ah...!"

"..."

Forced away by the descending air pressure that the helicopter was creating, Aria and Reki retreated till they were at my side.

Aria pointed her Governments at the AS365 as if in intimidation, but she did not fire.

It seemed that Reki was observing my order, "Do not kill,"--and she did not shoot the helicopter.

As if jeering at the two, the helicopter swept over the Shinkansen from the back to the front like it was making fun of them.

"Uah!"

Twin-tails pulled taut by the wind, Aria, behind me, was forced to retreat in the direction of advancement.

The helicopter--

"...Uu, Uoah!?"

Directly above Muto, who had shouted into the incam in surprise--it hovered in the air above the cab. No, to be more accurate, it was not hovering. At 350 km/h, it had started to run parallel to it. In the air.

From that helicopter, which seemed as if it was originally for rescue purposes, the hatch opened and--*Thud.*

Koko, a hook attached to her feet, descended to the tip of the Shinkansen.

The weapon that the third Koko was holding was the famous rifle, renowned for having the highest reliability in the world, an M700. The one that was destroyed by Reki was painted with camouflage paint, but this one, apparently for night-combat, was colored matte black.

"**Sister Pao**--I kept you waiting. Let's go to **Sister Mei**."

The Koko that came to reinforce ordered the second Koko, Paonyang, who had earlier called her, "**Sister Juu**".

I could understand it from her attitude, it seems that this sniper girl is the eldest sister.

"**Yes--Sister Juu**"

Paonyang responded to Juujuu with one sentence, *Ba!*

While unfastening the buttons of her ethnic costume, she dived towards the right of the vehicle.

"--!?"

At these movements which appeared suicidal, I drew in a sharp breath--

Billowing in the empty space, Paonyang's clothes expanded into one large piece of cloth like an unfolding piece of origami--as I watched, it turned into a parachute.

This scene. I've seen it before.

Turning into a parachute in an emergency, it was the same as Riko's modified uniform.

Koko, using it not for airborne purposes but to glide, moved in a 'C'-shape next to the Shinkansen.

And, embracing Meimei, who was collapsed at the brink of the back end of the train, she gracefully descended.

Severing the parachute of clothes, Paonyang* was only wearing underwear--despite the fact that she was fourteen years old, she was wearing something like crimson lingerie--and she hid her body behind the installation at the base of the pantograph.

Looking closer, in that one instant, the Seiryuutou that had been embedded into the anterior of the train had been pulled out as well.

(...This is bad...!)

My mind in Hysteria Mode told me that the situation had devolved in a mere moment.

While Paonyang was using the broad Seiryuutou as a shield to protect herself from the Dragunov, she planned to draw Reki into Aru=Kata. Because, if Reki did not have her bayonet, then close-combat was akin to impossible for her.

From the other side, the front of the vehicle, Juujuu pointed the M700 sniper rifle at Aria.

Aria too pointed her Goverments back at her, but there was 20 meters of distance between Juujuu and her. It was not a distance where one could shoot accurately with the accuracy of a pistol.

Each of their enemies having taken an advantageous position, Aria and Reki retreated towards me, who was in the middle of the train, as if clamping down on me with their backs.

And, as if symbolizing the two person's relationship, still unable to try and cooperate in this situation--they stayed like that, their backs facing one another.

"**Sister Pao!** This is it for business. There are no hostages anymore. The Japanese government won't give us any money.

"I understand, **Sister Juu!** Retreat and blow up the train. We can't take these people back with us either."

In the sky above the Meimei sisters, who were talking to each other, the helicopter, which had been vacated, rose by a few meters before it stood-by.

Apparently calculating the distance between it and the Shinkansen with a camera, while doing that, it preserved its speed and altitude. It seemed that auto-pilot functionality had been installed on it.

Functionality that was the same as something like the functionality of spacecraft flying parallel to and on the edge of a small planet.

That is amazing. As expected of I-U's engineer.

And--as expected, they are the descendants of China's General of the Three Kingdoms, Cao Cao.

Despite the fact that we wanted to drive them to a dead end, at some point in time, we had had that inflicted upon us.

I had learned this from World History, it seemed that Cao Cao was also a scholar who researched and compiled ancient China's Art of War, "Sun Tzu".

And according to Sun Tzu's Art of War, the three conditions that were critical to victory are: "The time of the skies, the advantages of the earth, the peace between men."

If one were to analyze it in Assault terms, 'the time of the skies' would hold the meaning of timing, 'the advantages of the earth' would hold the meaning of positioning, and 'the peace between men' would hold the meaning of teamwork.

The Kokos had chosen their perfect timing, successively attacking us, using the train and the helicopter freely in order to take the advantageous position, and since they were triplets, they had taken advantage of their synchronization...now, each of them had determined the target that they could defeat.

On the other side, we were limited by the timer of Non-Stop, we were thrown into confusion on the roof and the interior, and with Aria and Reki turning their backs on each other, I was clamped in-between them.

Even though we had higher numbers, even though our personal ability was not below theirs--we had been pressured, driven to a corner.

At this rate, Aria and Reki will be crushed, and then I will be killed in a crossfire.

If--we don't do something.

But, what do we do?

What do we do...!

My mind in Hysteria Mode driven into full operation, after a few seconds--

"...!"

The image of a method to turn this around flashed into my head.

But...Hey, me.

Is that image really possible?

To realize it, we have to have the same thing as the Kokos, the three conditions of heaven, earth, and men.

The time of the heaven--with the correct timing.

The advantage of the earth--creating an advantageous position.

But, for the sake of that, the peace between men--teamwork between Aria and Reki is required.

Right now, that is missing.

Therefore, we cannot help but create it.

--Create it. Who?

Me.

Even if just for a moment. I will make these two people link hands. For the sake of victory.

"Aria, Reki."

To the backs of the two, I spoke.

"I believe. In the two of you, in the depths of your hearts...I believe that you trust each other."

Juujuu is trying to maximize her profits--Paonyang is trying to charge outwards--now!

"--Then, a make-up handshake."

I threw my own Beretta and Desert Eagle up into the air.

And as the two lingered in the air--

Aria's and Reki's arms grasped each other behind their backs.

And half forced, their hands came firmly together.

"!?"

"?"

Aria and Reki were linking hands like girls that were really good friends with each other, turning around to face each other.

While leaning over like a dancer, I--

-with my right and left hand, I turned each of their arms to back to their waists. From a bird's-eye view, we would be in an S-shape.

And, as if I was a chess piece in an axis of revolution, I turned a semi-circle, bent on one knee.

--*Guru*---!

Using me as an axis--Aria and Reki twirled around as if in a waltz. For me.

--"Castling Turn"--

Two pieces moving in one turn to switch places, a special chess move.

Aria. Reki.

You're good girls. Both of you.

Aria trusted. Trusted Reki, who moved, trusting me.

Reki too trusted. Trusted Aria, who moved, trusting me.

Focusing our consciousness for the enemy's attack, at the timing where we could not defend or dodge--

The two used me as an intermediary, trusting each other, putting teamwork into play. In a mere moment.

But, the moment of that inversion was more than enough.

Their positions changed, each of Reki and Aria's opponents were-- Juujuu for Reki, Paonyang for Aria, switching into that position. As I expected.

Sniping versus sniping. Pistol versus pistol.

We had set up that position. With that "Castling Turn".

"--!"

Bang!

Unable to cancel her shot out of reflex in that instant, Juujuu's bullets were--*Bch! Clank!*

Catching the Desert Eagle that I had released earlier, I used Billiard Shot with my last .50AE.

Juujuu's bullet deflected at an oblique angle, Reki counterattacked with the Dragunov--*Tan!*

She shot at the feet of the Koko that was a sniper, Juujuu.

"**--Ah!**"

Tripping in the same manner as Meimei from earlier, Juujuu slid towards the front of the Shinkansen.

"Koko!"

---*Bang Bang Bang Bang Bang Bang!*

At the back of the vehicle, Aria, while shooting the Governments in both her hands, ran towards Paonyang.

At Paonyang, who was using the Seiryuutou as a shield and planting her feet, I--switched the Beretta which I caught to full-auto, following up with a barrage which all but left my magazine empty.

As expected, apparently unable to endure the consecutive attacks of the Governments and the Beretta, Koko,

"**Kyuu!**"

-fell on her butt.

Clank Clank!

The Uzi and Seiryuutou held in her left and right hands were precisely torn out of her hands by Aria's .45ACP bullets.

Finally disarmed...towards Paonyang, who was left with the ungraceful appearance of only wearing undergarments,-

"--You're under arrest!"

Without holding back, she charged forwards.

The weapons she was holding having been shot, her hands probably numb, Paonyang was bound by Aria, who had immediately bowled her over, with a wire.

"This is payback for tying me up back then!"

Because, shouting that, Aria had bound Meimei, who could not fight, too, I turned to look at the front of the car--

"..."

At the edge of the continuing slope at the head of the Shinkansen, Reki was crouching there wordlessly.

"**Sister Pao! Sister Mei! Save me! I'm slipping! I'm falling!**"

In that direction, apparently, clinging unseen to the bottom of the slope, I could hear the sound of Juujuu screaming.

"You are rather noisy.　Since you are also a princess, please know your position."

Chchk--

Taking a stance of placing the Dragunov against her shoulder, Reki's barrel was pointed directly at the helicopter in the air.

"...Uguu..."

It seemed that the thought of it being shot down was intolerable--at that, Juujuu fell silent.

--Koko, Koko, and Koko--

All three of them had been rendered useless in combat. Finally.

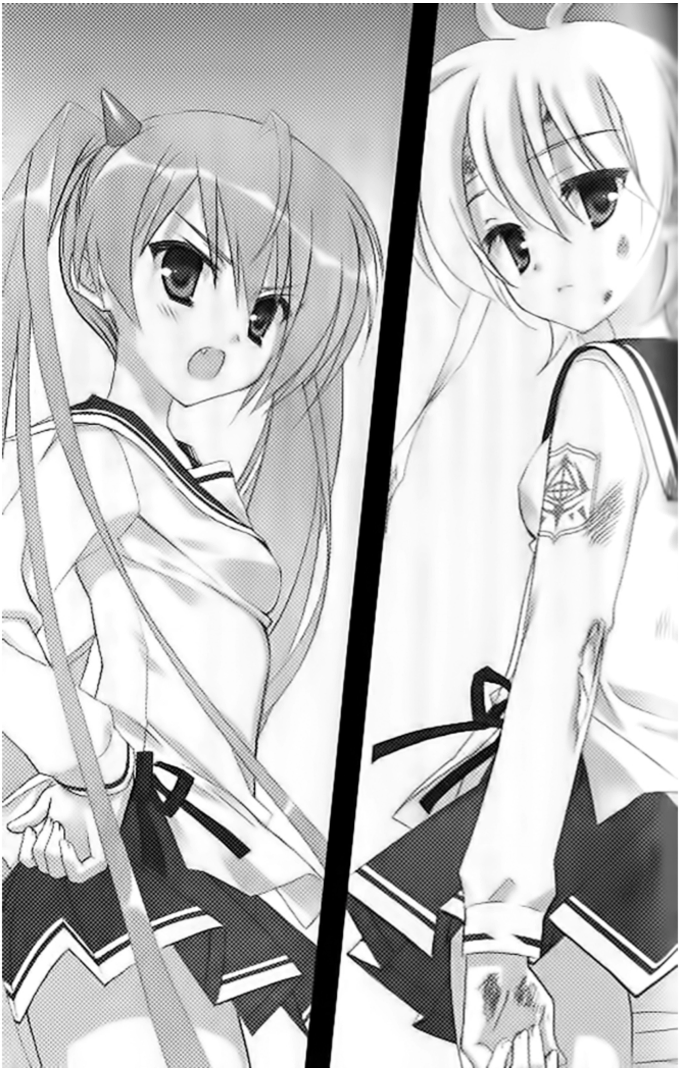
...There's nobody left, right? After this.

"It can't be that there's more of you, right!?"

Apparently thinking the same thing as I, Aria, *Step*

Not able to hold back, she stepped on Meimei and Paonyang who looked exactly like her--

Whoosh Whoosh, spinning the pistols on her left and right, she inserted them back into the holsters below her skirt.



And, facing upwards, Aria and--

-Reki, standing up, turned to face each other at the same time.

Those eyes, and those eyes, met.

"...D-don't misunderstand, Reki."

Blushing a little, Aria had started stuttering.

"Earlier...was just my body moving by itself."

"--The same goes for me, it was only that my body was moving by itself."

Reki too also said that, remaining stubborn, but--

Aria. Reki. I understand.

Your line of sight, meeting now, was different from earlier.

Those are the eyes of two people who acknowledge each other, the eyes of a Butei and a Butei. Earlier, the event of helping each other which I facilitated--I pray that that is the new first step between two people.

"---**You flat chested girl! Remember this!**"

From the tip of the car, Juujuu's voice--

"?"

Turning to that, **Buwaaaaaa...!**

Apparently having taken it out of her sleeves, a pink smokescreen was thrown up, whirling into a vortex.

Together with the smoke, Juujuu seemed to be washed away by the cutting wind--she flew towards the back end of the vehicle.

"--!"

Juujuu, flying extremely far to the back in the space of an, 'Ah', *Whoosh....*!

Parachute expanding, she performed a rapid deceleration.

Where she was inside the pink smoke, I did not really know, but in the instant that the smoke parted, I saw--hugging her knees to herself, in that position, she had slowed to around 50 km/h.

And staying in that position, *Zaaaaa*...she touched ground in a small field.

"--What a cold-hearted sister. She left you here."

At Aria, who said that to the Kokos at her feet, apparently slightly regretful that she had let one person get away--

""Kihi...Kihihihihihihi!""

The Kokos responded with an ominous laugh.

"A fight between a tiger and a dragon--We'll take you on the road with us."

"This isn't Kokos' loss. Everyone will be blown away by **Explosive Bubble**! Idiot, idiot, idiot!"

Kun--The Shinkansen sped up even more. With this, our speed is 370 km/h...!

Apparently not able to keep up at this speed, Koko's helicopter, in the air above us--began to lag behind.

Once it was a certain distance from the train, the helicopter decelerated...landing on the road next to the track.

"You can't do anything except for fight. You're different from Koko."

"Kinchi, you're a useless, slow, idiotic turtle."

There was no longer an escape route. For Koko. And for us.

The Shinkansen was operating in an urban area. No matter where it explodes, there will be casualties.

"--That's right. I'm not nimble like Riko or Aria. I cannot use any techniques like Shirayuki. I don't have the skills like Muto to be able to drive anything. By myself, I cannot do anything."

However, my ears had already caught it.

That noise.

"That's right. You can't do anything!"

At Koko, who said that in a high pitched voice--

"But, *we* can do anything--"

From behind me, who answered with that--the sound of a horn rang out--

Another Shinkansen had chased us.

""...?""

The Kokos, brows creased, looked at the Shinkansen that was chasing us in shock.

"In this Caravan I, that was something that we learned as well."

We used a wire, returning from the back of the vehicle to the interior.

And for once, the Kokos cooperated with Aria as she brought them inside.

The door to the vehicle was opened due to Muto's operation, and from the door of the rescue Shinkansen, traveling at the exact same speed along the straight railroad--

A tube, roughly 1 meter in diameter, was extended this way, automatically attaching itself with a hook.

"Aya, Ayayayayayaya!"

Sliding down that tube as if it was a slide was--

Thump, Her butt planted on the floor, Amdo's Hiraga Aya.

"...I apologize, Hiraga-san. For dragging you into this."

"What are you talking about! If it's one of my customer's problems, no matter where it is, Aya will come running! Tohyama-kun, Reki-san, Riko-chan, everyone is my important customer!"

Hiraga-san tugged on the rope that she had brought with her in the tube, pulling several different tools and a piece of machinery that looked like a fire extinguisher with her--whilst she was doing that, her eyes blinked at me. It seemed that she was trying to wink, but apparently, she couldn't do it.

A girl whom I never know if she's skillful or not.

Bringing in her tools, the tube that was crossing the space between the two Shinkansen's was taken off. For the purpose of transferring signs and signals between each piece of track, there are poles, and this was for the sake of preventing the tube from clashing with them.

However, even though we had nowhere to run, for some reason, Hiraga-san was assembling her equipment in a good mood.

"A-Ayaya! I-i-it's leaking!"

I heard Riko's voice say that from the direction of the seats.

"Just hold on a little longer! If it leaks, then the switch in the seat will short-circuit!"

"Riko is short-circuiting too! Quickly, quickly! Save meeeee!"

Riko...wanted to go to the bathroom?

That's obvious. Because, she had drank far too much strawberry milk.

"Haven't you disabled it, Hiraga!"

Kun--Muto said while making the Shinkansen accelerate further.

With this--390 km/h.

"--***Nothing is impossible!!!***"

Flashing an innocent smile while working, Hiraga-san answered cheerfully.

We had passed Shinyokohama station. Time left till Tokyo station was--7~8 minutes, huh?

No. If you think about the distance that is needed for the vehicle's system to brake, it's even shorter than that.

Two instruments had been extended out of the fire extinguisher-like piece of equipment, and working very gently, attaching them to the window of the washroom, Hiraga-san--

"The vapor explosive will explode once it mixes with oxygen, I heard that earlier from Riko-chan through wireless."

-said that, and she started working cautiously, but skillfully.

It seemed that, with a cutter that was attached to the tip of the tube, she apparently opened two miniscule holes.

Inside those holes, from one side of the tube, something like a balloon began to expand outwards.

"This is...?"

To Aria, who was looking through the window, Hiraga-san thrust forth her flat chest.

"Inflated with nitrogen, it's a silicon balloon! When it has expanded to fill every corner, the vapor explosive will be forced into this vacuum cylinder."

GoGoGoGoGoGOGo...the sound of a compressor working.

After...three minutes. We had already entered Shinakawa station.

The balloon expanded, and the *Explosive Bubble* was forced into the gas cylinders while the balloon spread to every corner of the washroom.

Hiraga-san checked the pressure inside the cylinder.

The nighttime view of Tokyo flowed by on the left and right.

Tokyo station was already very close--!

"Kinji, the last acceleration...410 km/h...let's go!"

Kun---!

The shaking of the Shinkansen growing stronger, Hiraga-san stumbled a little.

Will she make it--as I watched over her--

Beep, the piece of equipment made a noise.

"...Aaalllright! I'm done!"

"--Muto, brake!"

Having shouted, I took Aria and Reki, as well as Hiraga-san, into the embrace of my two arms--

I braced my back against the wall of the vehicle.

--EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE--GIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII--

In a heartbeat, along with the noise of the wheels gripping--an ear-piercing braking noise.

CLANK!!

The most intense impact up till now rocked the Shinkansen.

Decelerating--

Bang!

Turning to the sound of the explosion, beside us, the window of the washroom beside us blew outwards.

However--the vapor explosive did not explode. All of it had been sucked into the gas cylinder by Hiraga-san.

Because the cylinder rolled to hit the wall with a clank, I felt a chill run down my spine--

"~~~~!"

I endured the G-force of deceleration with my back.

Outside the window, orange light started flashing up from below the car. Sparks raised from the wheels and the rails.

I had thought that after we hit the brakes, we would travel for over 1 kilometer, and we still had not stopped.

Staying like that, the Shinkansen entered Tokyo station--

Giiiiii...Gii...

Along with that ponderous sound--outside the window, the JR station name display could be seen.

--"Tokyo"--

Visible in the direction of the smoke rising up from below the chassis, that display...stopped.

Stopping--

We achieved it.

With this...everything has been resolved.

I took a deep breath, and--tapped on Aria's back as she continued squeezing her eyes tight in the midst of my arms.

It's all right now.

As if telling her that.

Aria raised her head--

Her camellia eyes first looking out the window, she turned from it to look up at me.

As if looking at a man who had realized something like a miracle.

"Aria...the reason I stay in a dormitory despite my home being in the city, I will tell you now."

Towards me, who was acting as Aria, continuing the small talk that we had had before going up the roof...

"...?"

Aria blinked her large eyes.

"--I don't really like trains."

At those words, Aria, while smiling wryly, replied with one sentence: "Same here,"

Tokyo station, which had been evacuated beforehand, was desolate.

Apparently supposed to act as a shield at the time of detonation, the trains belonging to the empty stations of Yamanote line, Keihintouhoku line, Chuuouhon line and Oumidou line were gathered here.

Furthermore, around the stop signs, sandbags were piled up to prepare for the explosion.

...How polite.

Aria and I stepped onto the platform...

"Ahaa! As a reward for my work, I'll be taking this~♪ Ayaya will help herself!"

From behind, Hiraga-san exited while innocently hugging the canister holding the "Explosive Bubble" to herself.

I see. With that as her goal, she helped us very happily.

"...Careful when you play with fire."

While smiling dryly, I put my hand on Hiraga-san's head, she who had a strong mercantile soul.

"..."

Next was, slinging the Dragunov over her shoulder, Reki, barefoot, descended onto the platform.

"'Tokyo~, Tokyo~, may the customers who are disembarking please be careful not to forget anything'"

Lastly, changing his tone to that of an announcer, Muto, dragging the two Kokos, exited.

On top of each other in an X-shape, sprawled on the platform, the Koko sisters were...were looking between us with an expression which seemed to express that, if we came any closer to them, they would bite us.

Really, what a huge fighting spirit. I want to act like that.

"You two. If you persuade your sister to give up--I'll connect your phones."

Aria sat on top of the two, her arms folded, triumphing over her victory with a serious expression.

"It seems like these people's helicopters have been locked down by the Kanagawa police. I'm not saying this just 'cause I'm Logi, but no matter what kind of person it is, they can't do anything while on foot. She's about to be caught."

While taking off the incam, Muto cracked his shoulders.

"Muto...you worked hard. Thank you."

"What's with the politeness? Butei Charter article 1. It says, do something something with your companions, right? Which is...hey, hey. Can we get out of this station? They really stacked up those sandbags. I was thinking about buying station-lunchboxes--rather, Ryuuyouken's Jet Sieuw Mai."

"Muto~kun! You can exit from here!"

"Kinji, I'll leave the rest to you. Bring them to Dagula and have them squeeze them a little for us."

Hiraga-san, apparently wanting to do the analysis of the Explosive Bubble, if even a moment earlier, and Muto, a station-lunchbox maniac, scurried from the platform of the Shinkansen.

(I think that the station has been locked down though...)

While smiling wryly at the backs of the two, I saw them off, and once again, I knelt down on one knee by the Kokos.

Looking closer, Aria was, from Meimei's sleeve--taking out tools and weapons one by one, knives, hooks, smokebombs, etc...I took a tool that Meimei was carrying, about the size of a rice ball, into my hand...

I tried pulling a strange string which was sticking out of it.

Doing it, *Pon.*

(Oh...?)

In around a second, expanding out of it like an airbag was--

-clutching her knees, Koko.

A dummy balloon with the appearance of a person.

"......!"

Having seen that, my mind, still in Hysteria Mode, screamed out a warning.

This is bad.

This puppet's characteristics...

These are the characteristics of, the person who had used a parachute of clothes, escaping to the side of the line, Juujuu.

That was--an inflatable dummy. Which is to say...

"--Sisters, retreat. For now, return to Hong Kong."

Koko's voice resounded from the end of the platform, and Aria, Reki, and I turned towards it in unison.

Over there was...dragging her feet, there was the figure of Juujuu, holding an M700 ready.

(Fuck...!)

Juujuu did not fall of the train.

Throwing up a smokescreen, at that point, she switched with the dummy...even if she was not able to climb up, she clung to the side of the Shinkansen. Until Tokyo, the whole while.

Probably crawling along the rail, Juujuu had distanced herself 100 meters, creating the distance to use a sniper rifle.

Nothing can be done with guns.

That aim was...on me. I knew that her sights were meeting my head.

"Reki, don't move!"

At Reki, trying to raise her Dragunov, Koko shouted.

Reki--had noticed that I was being aimed at. She did not ready her gun.

Just, staring in the direction of Juujuu.

"...Ouch!"

Just flicking my eyes to look in Aria's direction, Aria--was having her feet tightly squeezed by the Koko sisters.

The Kokos were, with some sort of desperation, yanking on Aria's hair and skirt.

With that, Aria can't move.

Because, she had gotten carried away, sitting on Koko.

"The wind trained Reki well. It made you lose the heart of a human. In this battle, I understood that veeeerryyy well. You are a girl I cannot use. So, already, you, I do not need."

"..."

"Reki--I expect that you still have bullets. *Die by them*. Right here, right now."

Juujuu was apparently still in pain from being shot by Reki, and while her foot was trembling--she gave that order.

The M700 aiming at my forehead was a bolt-action rifle, and it could not reload automatically.

If it shot me, in the time until the next bullet was in the chamber, she would be counterattacked by Reki.

She did not want to leave that opportunity.

So, Juujuu ordered Reki to shoot herself.

"If you die, I will not kill Kinchi. Kinchi is a piece I can use, Koko doesn't want to kill him either."

"Koko. As you say...I have one bullet. If I shoot myself, you won't kill Kinji-san?"

Towards Reki, saying that as if in confirmation--I turned in panic.

I had heard this from Jeanne at the Hotogi Shrine.

--Last Bullet--

When those of the clan of Ulus are backed into a corner, when they are hindering their companions--like the samurai which once existed in Japan, they perform Jiketsu. A clan that continues the culture of ancient Japan.

This is dangerous. This situation is--

"Stop it, Reki! No matter what, she won't ki-"

"Kinchi, shut up! Reki, the words just now was an oath by the name of **Koko**."

My voice was drowned by Koko's words.

"Waiting is unfair for Koko. Reki, shoot yourself right now. If I have to wait, Koko will shoot Kinchi. Reki, it's fine if after that, you shoot Koko. Rather than letting some other person take Kinchi, Koko chooses to die together."

"Koko. Princess of Ranban."

Having said that, Reki--

-placed the stock of the Dragunov at her feet.

"The **Reki** of Ulus asks. The oath you spoke of--not killing Kinji-san, will you abide by it?"

"You shouldn't make fun of me. Koko is the princess of the prideful Wei."

"--If you break the oath, all 46 girls of the Ulus will destroy you. With everything that they have, the skills that had once conquered the world, they will definitely take your life. By now, you should understand this."

Straightening her back, Reki placed the barrel under her own chin.

"Stop it...Reki!"

"Kinji-san.　The girls of Ulus are equal to bullets. However, I was...akin to a defective, unusable bullet. Unusable bullets are meaningless pieces of iron."

"Stop it, Reki! You're being tricked!"

Aria's high-pitched voice pierced the air.

"Kinji-san. You ordered me not to kill a person, but now, I, for the sake of protecting my lord---will shoot myself."

"...!"

"However, please understand that this is not disobedience of your orders. Because--"

"...Stop it..."

"--*I am a single bullet.*--"

She placed the toe of the foot which had lost its shoe on the trigger of the Dragunov.

"YOU ARE NOT A BULLET!"

My cry was also in vain--

Her expression not even flickering, with her toe, the trigger was--

--pulled.

--*Click*.

"...!"

Once again, Reki's eyes opened.

Those eyes were--

-clearly opened in surprise.

The bullet--did not fire.

"Misfire..."

Camellia eyes opened, murmuring to herself, Aria too had an expression which conveyed her disbelief.

As for modern bullets, the chance of a misfire is low. It would be correct to say that it is mostly nonexistent.

Furthermore, Reki had her extremely meticulous misfire prevention, even going so far as to make her bullets herself.

The chance of a misfire was one out of a billion...No, it had been controlled to the point where it was one out of a trillion, right?

That had just happened.

Reki was, at that--surprised. Clearly.

"Because, this gun will not fail me."

The Dragunov she had trusted that much had--

-failed. Failed Reki. Now, for the first time.

--Reki.

Earlier, you said that you were an unusable bullet, that you had no meaning.

Misfires have meaning too. Think about that meaning.

"...Kinchi!"

Juujuu-

-in that one instant, understood the change in the situation.

Reki could not kill herself. However, she had no bullets but an unusable bullet.

And, the next danger, the person who could fight was--me.

She is lost.

Kill me now and run, run without killing me and recreate this scenario, attacking us again.

In the space of that hesitation--I snatched the magazine out of the Dragunov that Reki was holding in blank shock.

"--Reki. Don't shoot yourself a second time."

While saying that, I took the last bullet out of the magazine before Reki's eyes--

And I clasped it in my two hands.

While doing that, I stared directly into Reki's eyes. I am furious. For the sake of telling her that.

"This is an order. You said that you would listen to my orders, correct?"

"..."

Reki matched my sharp gaze--*Nod.*

Wordlessly, she nodded.

Having confirmed that, I revealed the bullet in front of Reki's eyes,

"Now--be born again."

I told her that. *Click*.

Returning it to the magazine, I slotted the magazine into the Dragunov.

"--Reki. The person you should shoot is that enemy. Once more, believe in me."

I said that to Reki--

Bang--

While I turned back, I stood in a position where I could protect Reki from Koko's sniper rifle.

She would definitely shoot before Reki, who was cradling the gun in a daze.

That one shot--well, if it comes, it comes.

As for my guns, I do not have anymore bullets. Billiard Shot is impossible.

Bullet slicing is impossible too. I don't have my knife anymore.

The Bite I did against Patra--that is also impossible.

That defense is imperfect. Because, I will faint from the impact. Koko still has bullets. If I fall, at the last, I will be killed by the second loaded bullet.

All the methods I had used till now could not be used in this situation.

--However, I will not die. Hysteria Mode is unmatched in this world.

My reflexes, 30 times faster than normal, thrust my hands forward before I could think.

That's right. Definitely, if I do this--!

Towards me, who had taken that stance--Koko--

"Kinchi!"

--*Bang!*

Along with the gunshot, a 7.62mm NATO was released.

The palm of my two hands, stuck out, was--

-just the index fingers and middle fingers of my opened hands were overlaid in a #-shape.

--Can I do it? This kind of thing?

I was only half-confident in myself, but I could not think of anything but this. In this instantaneous moment.

I surrounded the enemy's bullet trajectory with the square made of my fingers.

The bullet, showing no intention of stopping, approached my fingers--

"--!"

--*Whoosh*--

Using Edge Catching - Double Finger, I closed in on the bullet with the two fingers of my right hand--

However, the bullet was not restrained, and it flew through the space between my fingers, heading towards me.

A 7.62mm NATO's initial velocity is supersonic.

The full-metal jacket, heading straight between my eyes, was averted slightly to the left--

While spinning, it flew towards my left eye.

With my index finger and my middle finger, once again, I closed in on the bullet.

And, once again, I slightly changed its direction. Further to the left--

"--!"

Whoosh!

A sharp pain ran through my cheek.

And--the bullet--

Clink--

-left and behind me, far away, the glass of the showcase of the vending machine for flowers had been hit, and it was cracked.

As for me--I was not hit.

The bullet had just grazed my left cheek.

I did it--

It was theorized in but a moment, yet when I had tried to do it, it had worked.

With my bare hands, slanting the course of the bullet...a technique which changes it into something akin to the symbol, "/".

If I were to give it a name--Slash--would be what it would be called.

As expected of Hysteria Mode.

Finally, it seemed that I had become such that I was able to deflect a bullet.

Well...I had been injured quite badly though, spraining my fingers. On both of my hands. It really hurts.

"Kinji...y-you, just now..."

Her voice filled with shock, Aria's eyes had widened into circles.

From next to her--

"--In the midst of this darkness.--"

Reki's voice.

Turning to look at her, Reki was closing her eyes, and her Dragunov was raised once again. Aimed towards Juujuu.

That was something I would have never thought would have come from Reki, an extremely irrational movement.

Reki trusted in the fact that the misfire from just now could be fired. That which was uttered just now--

-My words.

"A path of light exists--outside of the light, nothing can be seen, nothing exists. I--"

Reki's...poem when she was sniping had changed.

Opening those eyes once again, Reki--

"--am one who runs in the midst of that light."

-pulled the trigger.

--*Bang!*

"--!"

This time, having been fired, the Dragunov's 7.62mm x 54R--

--*Chiiiiii*--

--brushed past Juujuu's head as she was reloading, not hitting its target.

"Kihi...!"

Koko, having broken out into a cold sweat, laughed, holding up the M700.

Aria sucked in a deep breath. Reki, who had perfect accuracy, had, regretfully, missed--so she thought, however, that was wrong.

It is that sniping technique. I had seen it before.

"--!?"

Bang!

Koko, who was on the same level of Reki, fired.

Diagonally, in a completely different direction.

"...? ? ?"

And, *Stagger, Stagger,* she stumbled about--

-and with an expression which revealed that she had no idea what was happening to her body, *Thud.*

-at that spot, she toppled.

That was a sniping technique which Reki had used against the

Caucasus Silver Wolf--the Haimaki of present, during the period where he had once infiltrated Butei High.

With a normal bullet, grazing one part of the body, applying pressure on one portion of the nervous system, a complex sniping technique which numbed the recipient.

It can be performed on humans too, that technique. As expected of Snipe's prodigy, Reki.

Getting a concussion, her feet unsteady, Koko used the M700 like a cane, trying to rise again, but--

Thud!

Hidden below the platform and above the track, Riko came charging out--and she clung to Koko's back.

"Mi-Mine Riko!"

"Cao Cao-! That's also Cao Cao, this is also Cao Cao. All three are here~. Kufu!"

Like a piggyback monster, she tightly squeezed Koko's body with her two legs, performing a full nelson on her with her hands--and very literally, Koko's two long twin-tails, like snakes, moved to tighten around her neck.

This choke, used in an attempt to kill me twice--Shanshikeikeihou, Riko-version.

"Go to sleep with your own technique, Cao Cao. The person who taught me this move has become my enemy."

"......! !"

Even so, Juujuu reached her hands out to Riko's face as she was behind her, trying to counterattack, but--

-having taken advantage of opportunity where Meimei and Paonyang were rooted in shock, she flew straight towards Juujuu.

"Koko--you really don't know when to give up!"

"Wai-! Aria! Time out, time out!"

Aria ignored Riko's voice, extremely panicked, *Thud!*

Going into a double-legged dropkick from sprinting forward with all her might, she rammed into Koko.

Riko, *Thump!*, along with Juujuu, blasted backwards--

"~~~~~~~~~~~..."

Finally, she seemed to have fainted. Riko, too.

While smiling wryly at Aria, binding the third Koko with a ferocity akin to that of a tiger devouring a panda--

This time, with this, everything is resolved--I turned my back on the Kokos.

(Reki...)

On the other side, Reki--apparently exhausted, collapsed to the platform, sitting completely straight.

From the Dragunov, which she had not been able to shoot herself with--

As if feeling some sort of message, she tightly, tightly hugged it to herself.

I knelt by her side, and...

I could see that, from Reki's eyes, a single tear fell.

"...Reki..."

"I...do not hear it anymore."

Those shoulders were trembling slightly.

"Hear what?"

"The voice of the wind--I can no longer hear it. The wind has already stopped speaking."

Reki has...

Until now, never made movements that she had thought of herself.

Just being ordered by the "Wind", with this, living like a robot.

Those directions had faded away--so she said.

That was probably the release of the delusion that had been engrained into her by someone.

I had learned this in Inquesta, that type of mind control could be released by a severe shock.

With the shock of her Dragunov failing her, which Reki had trusted from the bottom of her heart, she had been released from that unseen hold.

"The wind is no longer saying anything--huh. Isn't that the same as saying, "think by yourself"?"

Towards me, who had said that, placing my hand on Reki's shoulder...

Reki raised her head.

"I do not understand. From now on, what do I do? From now on, alone--"

"It's fine. The wind is something which blows where it wants, right? And also--you are not alone. I am together with you. Because, after all, you've already submitted our team registration to the school. Within this time, by yourself."

Saying that, I flashed a small smile, straightening my back.

Reki...was silent.

Staying silent, her left and right hands grasping the grip and stock of the Dragunov for support, she stayed in that position for a few moments--

And when a gust of wind blew through the station, *Whoosh,* she raised her head.

"--***anu urus wennuia***...Eternity--"

Reki had--

...A song...?

"--***Celare clai ol....tu plute ire, urus claia*** Sky--"

--started singing.

I knew not which country those words stemmed from. I could hear that parts seemed to be in Japanese.

Amazingly mysterious lyrics.

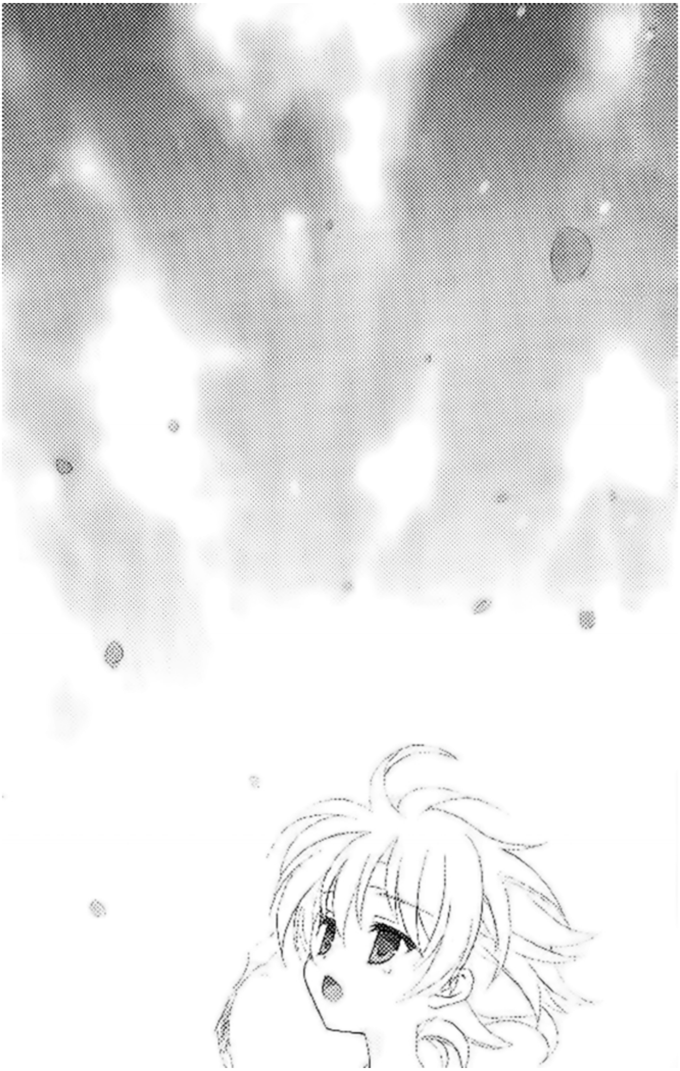
However...it was, a beautiful song.

Even then, its rhythm seemed was so nostalgic, so familiar.

And, Reki's voice. It was wondrous. Its volume was soft, but she sang like a true singer, with perfect tone, such that anybody there who was listening to that beautiful voice would be rendered speechless.

"--***Raios Zalo Ado***...Ясны, ясны на небе звёзды--"

Standing up, Reki sang, and it reminded me of a bird setting off from its nest, a beautiful, vibrant song--



Along with that continuing melody, the wind flowing through the platform strengthened.

As if it was singing. The wind too.

Aah. This is probably--

-The parting song between the wind and Reki.

"--***Celare claia ol...tu plute ire, urus claia*** Sky--"

At the refrain of the song, the wind, intensifying into a gust--

From the vending machine which I had broken earlier, the bouquet of flowers which the person who says farewell gives to the one who sets off on his journey was swept up, released into the air.

The flowers, coming loose, were caressed by the wind, with innumerable amounts of petals scattered into the air.

In the midst of that multi-coloured mist of flowers--Reki walked atop the platform.

Towards the end, which was completely desolate.

(...Reki...)

All words lost, we could not even open our eyes in the face of the intensified wind.

When I closed my eyes, the last thing I could see was--

"--***anu urus wennuia***...Eternity--"

-in the instant the song, returning to its first line, finished, turning around, Reki--

-as if having been reborn, her fresh, neat face.

That face still could not form anything but a slight expression, but...

...It was smiling, I thought.

The wind stopped--opening my eyes again, Reki's figure was no longer there.

Aria panicked at the fact that Reki had suddenly disappeared, but...I was not like that at all.

Isn't it alright? For the first time, Reki started walking by her own will.

She had stopped living by the orders of someone, and herself acting like a new wind, she walked towards freedom.

So, this is like Reki's second birthday.

Rather, I felt as if I wanted to give her my blessing.

'Happy birthday, Reki'--that.

Brought to our location by Muto and company, the Jieitai's bomb squad came out...

After them, a higher-up from the police, Butei High's Ranbyou and Tsuzuri, those teachers, and the aftermath squad--

A few Butei High students came with them.

After hearing of Reki's disappearance, Snipe's third year Shibaiko-senpai tried looking for her, but...I thought it is useless. Because, by her own will, Reki could completely erase anything like a hint of her presence. As long as she does not try to come out, no matter who looks for her, she won't be found. Even if you brush right past her.

Also...because she had erased her presence by herself, she should be doing things covertly. Right now.

While I was thinking that, I exited from the desolate, maze-like Tokyo station along with the others.

Exiting from the Marunouchi exit, there were several black Butei Cars waiting.

Apparently an Assault elite, and treated differently as such, Aria was taking a car together with Ranbyou...Each of us, Riko, Muto, Hiraga-san and I, were driven by freshmen from Logi, split up, sitting in the backseat of our respective cars.

"...Now that I think about it, did you make it to a toilet? There was no toilet on Car 16."

Hysteria Mode released, I asked lightly, and Riko planted her fist in my left cheek, pressing down on it firmly.

Ou-ouch. The bullet graze from when I had performed Slash, hurt a little.

"Ki-kun! You're not allowed to ask that question of girls! I certainly made it in time!!"

Apparently, Riko, blushing, had...well, somehow done it somewhere.

Pursue it any further, and she'll be pretty pitiable. Even the me of normal understood that.

Turning away to face the window of the backseat, Riko--

"--Kinji. You're a cheater."

-with the manner of speaking of the Other Riko, murmured that.

"What are you talking about?"

"This. My eyes cannot be cheated. Here. There's the mark of a knife."

Saying that, the thing that Riko took out of her pocket was--the shell of a sniper rifle's bullet.

That was the casing of the bullet which Reki had tried to shoot herself with, and after that had failed, shot Koko with.

"...You have sharp eyes, Riko. As expected."

Sinking deeper into the seat, I received the casing from Riko's small hand.

A normal bullet's casing has an ignition point known as a primer attached to it. If there is no primer, the bullet cannot be fired. In other words--the end result is a misfire.

I...

...after hearing about the "Last Bullet" at the Hotogi branch...if the situation became such that she had been pressured to the last bullet--Reki, as Jeanne had said, might shoot herself. That's what I thought.

So, at the sleeping Reki's side, when I was performing the simple disassembly of the Dragunov--I extracted the bullets from the magazine, and removed the primer from the last bullet in advance. In preparation for Koko's next attack.

Removing the primer from the bullet was a rather dangerous action, but if I used my knife, using the special method that I had learned from Nii-san, I could do it.

As I expected, Reki tried to shoot herself with the last bullet--and that bullet ended up being a misfire.

After that, I took the bullet out of the magazine, and I reattached the primer which I had enclosed in my pocket. Clasping the bullet, I acted as if I was concentrating on doing something.

And with that, loaded once again, this bullet performed its correct function, becoming the bullet which decided our victory.

"Kinji--planned this? The whole flow?"

"Well, about half. Rather, it doesn't matter anymore, right? That."

Riko looked this way with an expression of admiration, this time staring out my window.

Visible there was a large billboard advertising the 3D movie to be opened to the public shortly, "The Wizard of Oz"

Now that I think about, when I had eaten ramen with Reki at Odaiba too, that billboard was visible.

"The Wizard of Oz". When I was small, my mother read that to me from a picture-book--and one of the characters which appeared in it, the tin lumberjack who was missing a heart, received a human's heart at the end.

Every one of us is probably like that.

The wandering Dorothy, the cowardly lion, the stupid scarecrow.

However, everyone lent each other their strength, and each of them managed to take hold of their future self.

Like that fairy tale, immediately getting it before the ending...is obviously impossible.

However, it's fine if we approach it step by step. Towards our new self.

So, Reki--you should do that too, from now on.

"Ki-kun, why're you smiling? Are you so happy to be next to Riko?

While pushing Riko, who had returned to Normal Riko and was cuddling up against me, I noticed that I was smiling wryly.

I had been completely--drawn to Reki's side. I was just thinking about this.

Lima Syndrome, which I had planned to use on the night which I was placed under Sniper Restriction by Reki--

-the reverse of that psychological phenomenon, Stockholm Syndrome, exists.

The people who are imprisoned feels sympathy for the people who are imprisoning them...a phenomenon where they become completely allies of their capturers.

This was, probably, that.

I had planned to win her over, but I had been won over instead.

Of course, the other side was not conscious of this result.

Now, I am definitely standing by that wordless and expressionless beautiful girl who is out there somewhere--Reki.

4th Ammo - Team Baskerville

Returning to Butei High in the night....

After the Masters ensured that there were no severely wounded casualties, they quickly split us up by subject and distributed debriefing records. It sickens me. Let us rest a bit first. At least allow us a bowl of katsudon. Aria was taken by the Assault instructor Ranbyou to the principal's office. Riko and I were Inquesta while Mutou was of Logi; we were all interviewed by our respective instructors. After that, the Masters got into contact with the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department, the media and the JR. I thought we would be castigated for cutting the Shinkansen; however, with the capture of the perpetrators, this did not happen.

On the contrary, we were lauded for resolving the issue. Officially to boot. Like this, Butei High did not have to take responsibility for Koko and her group's hijack of the Shinkansen to extort money from the Japanese government. This was a very nicely done maneuver no matter how you look at it.

"Tohyama-kun, I'll tell you this before the start of legal hearings for a plea-bargain. The fact that you all were targeted must be kept strictly confidential lest some very important person gets upset."

The Inquesta Master Takamagahara Yutori said. With the presence of the black suited man during our debriefing on top of Yutori's words, I could somehow understand that. Judging from his badge, that guy was an official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs holding the class of a vice-minister. This was probably related to Aria. As a general rule, regardless of whatever cases Butei are involved in, international ones are their own responsibility. However, Aria is a foreign aristocrat.

It was better for Japanese-British relations that the fact that she was exposed to great danger on Japanese soil not to be made public. These are the so-called "adult matters" in which we kids have no say. This isn't exactly a very good point either because if it continues to worsen, it would prove troublesome indeed.

Perhaps there was an attempt to offer us hush money, for the official mentioned something about "the government offering us distress money in the future" of which our polite refusals of his good-will caused us to be eventually dismissed very late.

Once we finished, I headed over to the No. 2 girls dorm. To the highest floor......to Reki's room. Opening the door with the cardkey I got from her before, I found the interior dark. Although I already expected this, still there really was no one in.

(Reki...)

A naked light bulb cast its light to no purpose on a room of bare concrete. The living room window was shut and the silence was deafening.

The wind.....didn't blow here.

It wouldn't anymore.

Returning to my own room in the boy's dormitory, here too, there was nobody. According to Ranbyou whom I crossed paths with on my way, Aria had headed to Toranomon for a preparatory meeting with a female lawyer whom she had hired, before the trial of her mother Kanzaki Kanae. Doing so after such a major operation; she really is tough.

I entered the living room....

Chika, *chika*

I noticed the flicker of a light.

.....What? The answering machine of my rarely used landline is at maximum capacity? This is 1 min x 30 messages and with 30 minutes of recording time....With an unpleasant feeling in my heart, I pushed the playback button.

"Kin-chan, are you alright?"

As I thought, Shirayuki.

That girl....whenever anything happens, she'll have this habit of incessantly sending mail....As my cell was destroyed and thus could not be connected, she contacted here instead.

"If you receive this message, even if it might be a trouble....please call me back. I believe Kin-chan's alright, yet....guuugh....I'm really...worried....u...hu...hu...."

Shirayuki had been separated from me when she had been left behind in Shizuoka with the rear portion of railway cars.

I know you are worried, but don't call for 30 minutes.

After a momentary break, the recordings began to play the next portion.

"Uu...eguu...huu..Kin-chan...uu...uu...uuuuuuuu....."

S...scary!

Please stop crying into the recording. In the dead of the night it's like a ghost.

With apprehension, I played the next part which was...

".....I've just got a call from Butei High! I am so relieved when I heard that Kin-chan's alright. The criminals have all been captured too! How truly magnificently done....! Kin-chan is truly amazing. Truly amazing, Kin-chan is.....aa.....Kin-chan is...truly an amazing gentleman...."

Why the repetition...

"All of us here are fine. We are taking the Tokaido Line back. It will be pretty late when we get back but I'll prepare a feast after we return. Just a short while back, I bought fresh crab!"

Shirayuki being Shirayuki, this switch in tone is too fast.

Speaking of which, have you brought the crab back yet?

Uu...there's still some more messages. I'm getting sleepy already.

"Kin-chan, about that...about that...that pregnant woman aboard the Shinkansen; she safely delivered her baby at a Shizuoka hospital! That's just great news...I just received the photograph by e-mail. It's a cute little girl! Errm....speaking of which...do you like babies Kin-chan? I like them a lot. They are so cute, just looking at them makes me feel all blissful inside. That...that's why I.....I....someday...someday, Kin..."

Pi......I pushed the stop button.

Stop....stop.

This no longer has anything to do with the initial purpose of ensuring my safety. Furthermore, what's with this bad feeling crawling down my back. Right, time to delete them all. Despite being sleepy; well Shirayuki was rather worried, so I gave her a call. In the face of all that excited screaming, I simply said, "I'm fine. Don't worry. Sleep now," before quickly ending the call.

Disconnecting the phone line and having showered, I lay alone in bed for a long time without my cell and nothing in particular to do.

(Koko, Koko, Koko...)[6]

I dimly reflected on the memory of the three sisters who had targeted Reki and me. Those three were all captured at Tokyo station, screaming and cursing all the way to the end. To better differentiate them for the Logi seniors escorting them, the words "eldest daughter", "second daughter" and "third daughter" were stuck on their foreheads, in a most amusing manner; just like the kyonshi in that old film "Mr. Vampire". Tonight, those three sisters would be interrogated by the Dagula's top S instructor Tsuzuri Umeko.

I don't know the details and I don't wish to know, but I hear that Tsuzuri does some rather horrific stuff to suspects during her interrogations. Good. Let them get their punishment.

(Well then....this time around...)

This time around, can I finally say my great ancestor's favorite phrase?

"With this, one case is closed"

But this phrase....thinking about it now, it has a ring of unease to it. One case closed. Doesn't this.....give the feeling that there will be a 2nd, a 3rd case? Oi....great ancestor....

Due to nothing happening after being vigilant for some time, I could spend my entire SW after Caravan I resting. No wait, it would be more proper to say, the start of the vacation. The prologue would be being awoken just some time after noon the next day by Shirayuki making crab fried rice. With Aria absent, that left Shirayuki and me to do the cleaning, washing and cooking. Shirayuki, who as ever, was a god with these household skills, was like one of the maids commonly found in Riko's games. I spent my vacation leisurely under the care of Shirayuki, who for some reason was extremely blissful every day, while taking my time to pick a new cell phone.

Just in the middle of those tranquil days, right in the midst of my vacation, Riko, who had somehow gotten the cardkey to my room from god knows where, appeared in my room. A brutal mood like that found in a Western shootout scene filled the room. "Ki~ku~n♪" Riko said in a catlike voice. "Get away from Kin-chan-sama, you adulterer!"[7] Responded Shirayuki. With a swing of a knife, I returned to those sad days; Riko clinging all over me for who knows, possibly the sake of killing time and Shirayuki would always grab her, swing her nagadosu, even let fly with her M60. My room has already been the scene of 10 grappling matches, 12 sword duels and 15 gun battles. Riko who likes games of chance besides fighting and Shirayuki who is easily provoked.....whether it be arm wrestling or speed eating, there have been many battles between those two. And Shirayuki being Shirayuki and having the ridiculous reasoning that "a wife should never lose to a mistress!" would always readily join battle. At times when I return home, those two would be on all fours head butting each other with grunts of "mo...!" "nnmo....!" like bulls......hey you two, aren't you actually on pretty good terms since it has even come to this? So it was that September arrived in the midst of this unceasing hubbub. The time had come to register the team roster that was submitted earlier even if I was reluctant to do so.

Normally, a representative from the team would attend the application, the Masters would give a confirmation call after the field trip and an affirmative reply would be made and finally, the confirmation photograph would be taken. However, as Reki did not respond to the Masters' call, our team had not been confirmed. Which is to say that I did not belong to any team and that I'm left dangling. Well, even if my case is a little special, truth is on our field trip, there were numerous "we are still not a team yet" incidents. That is why there were emergency measures known as "Just" for these students. These on-site applications simply required one to fill out and submit on paper the names of the team members. Once the Masters take a group photo, the team would be considered "acknowledged/registered." In short, it is a shortened, last-minute registration of a team. Nonetheless, the deadline for this emergency measure is tomorrow. As expected of me feeling impatient, I called Aria.

"About the formation of the team, please wait for a while." Awaiting instructions, I got only this from Aria.

"You told me to wait, that means you already have a plan?"

"Yes, but since you used that kind of tone on me earlier, I won't tell you. H-un."

Making that kind of anime sound with her nose, she hung up. It seems that..... she still could not let go over the "I'm fine with anything about the team formation" I had said before Caravan I. Certainly, that had been my fault however....good grief, Aria is certainly like a bratty kid in stature and personality.

Like that.....

During the deadline of the on-site applications the next day, I was unattached to any group. Students who did not manage to fill in an on-site application would have their team decided for them by the Masters. Well at worst, so be it. Either way, I still intend to transfer out of Butei High. Just when I was feeling a little unwell and forcing myself to study,

"Kin-chan, I'm sorry. I haven't said this until now...."

Shirayuki brought in something wrapped in a furoshiki. That body resembling a gravure model was dressed in a black outfit. The neat ribbon across the breast of her blouse was black. The hair band she normally wore was also black. Furthermore, her hair was tied up, which was rare. This was not like the usual Shirayuki. It appears that that clothing was Diviza Nero; the attire worn by students taking their team confirmation photos. It has been loaned out from Amdo.

"Ki..ki...ki...kun come here♪ The water here's sweet♪"

Riko sang as she appeared, also wearing black. She wore a design which daringly revealed her skin, particularly her breasts. Most disagreeable. One can tell at a single glance that she wore no underwear on her breasts. On that note, is the protection offered alright? Wearing bulletproof clothing which exposes the skin.... Averting my eyes in embarrassment upwards, I saw that the ribbons holding her two-side up tails in place were also black. These two were totally in black from head to foot.

"The team's....Just. You are all attending it?"

"Thaaat's right! Kiii...kun must go too!"

"......Me....too.....?"

"About that, even though it's not good to say, but....earlier, I divined that I would form a team with Kin-chan....so I did not tell anyone about the team's application. Furthermore, I heard from Aria after Caravan I that everyone would be in the team...."

I opened the furoshiki while listening to Shirayuki. Inside, was a black suit.

This is.....the Diviza Zero that I would use.

"Riko-rin and Aria also formed a two man team; however, we annulled it during the confirmation. Aria had changed her mind; this was for the purpose of forming a new team with Ki-kun and everyone else."

So saying, Riko showed me the application slip for the on-site application.

On it was....

Team Name "Baskerville"
Members

○ Kanzaki.H.Aria (Assault)

◎ Tohyama Kinji (Inquesta)
□ Hotogi Shirayuki (SSR)
□ Mine Riko (Inquesta)
□ Reki (Snipe)

These 5 names were written.

This is the team that Aria envisioned.

Setting aside the fact that a double circle denoted me as leader, even Aria had a single circle marking her as the vice-captain.

"Oi...this is...."

I said while pointing at Reki's name.

After the Just, the students of the newly formed team had to have a group photograph taken by the Masters. Like this, each team member displayed their mutual solidarity.

However.....Reki, who had vanished at Tokyo Station, was still missing.

Which means that there was no way we could register.

"Un....Since we cannot contact Reki-san, we may cancel her name.

But Kin-chan wants to do Butei work with her, right?"

Shirayuki said with upturned eyes, as if she shared the same misunderstanding as Aria.....

However, it didn't seem fitting to tell her about Reki interning herself to me as a sniper at this juncture. With nothing confirmed or denied, I listened to whatever else she had to say.

"That's why Aria was bent on including Reki in the team. She said that, 'if Kinji is to be included, then so too must Reki be included. Otherwise, this team would be against Kinji's wishes. '"

"But Rekyu is still missing. I don't know whether she can join the team like that," Riko said, continuing Shirayuki's observations.

"And thus Aria said that, 'letting Kinji have false hopes isn't good, so please don't tell him about the team before Reki has been admitted.' Well, Aria being concerned about Ki-kun is a good thing that's why Riko won't say anything more from now. Apologies."

Aria.....

So that's the reason you were so vague about the team last night. Such human concern was so gentle and female. Even if you were like a man in every other aspect.

"However we still could not contact Reki by phone in the end. Just in case, she sent the assembly location and time of the application to Reki by text but there was no reply."

Looking at the downcast Shirayuki, I thought, "That's understandable," since Reki's phone was destroyed in Kyouto by Koko.

"Aria is already at the photo taking site. She was already there waiting for Rekyu first thing in the morning. The deadline is noon today. 30 more minutes and it will be time. Well, we can't go yet Ki-kun! Put on your clothes! This is Ki-kun's on the spot changing show! Kyahaaa!"

Riko said as she reached for my belt while I stood still with the black suit in hand. Looking as if I would be stripped of my trousers, I shifted away from Riko.....With the Diviza Nero in hand, I left to change. Partly without protest.

My room was originally a four man room so there were a few to double as private rooms. Entering one of them, I straightened my hair before a mirror and got changed.

Kasha

From the roof, came the sound of a phone camera clicking.

"Ki-kun is too exposed. If I were using a pistol, Ki-kun would be a wind hole now."

Looking up, I saw that one of the roof panels had been removed. Riko hung upside down from there with her upper body sticking out, waving her rhinestone adorned cell phone.

....Appearing in weird places again, as usual.

"Girls shouldn't take pictures of men changing. Even if I don't do it, our roles would normally be reversed."

Already knowing that stopping Riko's weird behavior is fruitless, I checked out my new look with a black necktie in the mirror.

"Ki-kun's life photos can be sold to Yuki-chan for a considerable price. Kuhihihi..."

I say, Shirayuki would really buy them. You two really do get along, no? Definitely.

"By the way, is it okay with you Riko?"

Just in case....

I should ask Riko hanging over my head first. Looking in the mirror;

"You want to kill Aria and me. However fighting would be difficult if we form a team. Butei seriously fighting among themselves is strictly forbidden. Killings within a team are especially heavy crimes."

"Ha. This girl here is an outlaw. Tu es amnésie"

Riko.....her voice suddenly becoming sharp, turned towards me with a grin.

"The reason why I am working with you all, is so that others do not kill you. I said it after defeating Vlad, *"I won't forgive you if you get killed by anyone else besides me."* But after that, how many instances where there in which you all were nearly killed? It was also very dangerous this time round. I can't bear this any longer. Furthermore the Bandire[8] is fast approaching. For the sake of the future from now on before Aria and Kinji are fully grown, I will always be with you. Once the cerises [cherries] are ripe, I will eat you down anew.

"After this......the Ban..... what?"

Looking at Riko who mentioned that unknown danger....however, the ceiling was as it was before. There was no trace left let alone Riko. I let out a "hun" from my nose like I was trying to dispel this uneasy atmosphere before putting on my black suit and leaving the room.

This year's team photo shoot was held at the roof of the Inquesta block. When the 3 of us, Shirayuki, Riko and me, arrived, we found that there were more black-clad students there than we thought. 20-30 people were present. Were they all here for the Just? We were the same, yet its seemed that everybody was still hesitant at the end. Well, a Butei team is based upon mutual trust with lives. This is not something that can be so easily decided. Being unsure up to the last moment is entirely natural. I looked out over the rooftop beneath the overcast sky. There, amidst the milling crowd of students....was Aria. She was wearing what should be a specially made mini-sized Diviza Nero with a tube top beneath her jacket. Her navel was intermittently exposed as her clothes fluttered in the wind. A rectangle was marked out in black vinyl tape on the floor. The other teams waited in line in the middle of this area for Ranbyou to take their pictures.

"Oi, Aria. Kaminari-sama will eat your navel."

I said to the silent Aria who appeared to be having her picture taken.

"Kinji."

Aria, who had turned around, gave my navel and the overcast sky a "?" look

Her beautiful brows deeply furrowed, she walked towards me, Shirayuki and Riko.

"Once more you speak such ridiculous things. It isn't my navel that's going to be photographed."

Apparently, this child who has just returned to her country had no idea about the saying where Raijin is supposed to eat human navels.

Alright. Now was not the mood for explanation but next time I'll do so and give her a good scare. That's because Aria has a strong phobia of thunder.

"Approximately how long till the deadline?"

"Around 5 minutes."

At both Shirayuki and Riko saying this, Aria's camellia eyes turned up towards me.

"Kinji.....are you okay with it ....coming here? About you.... forming a team....with us"

"Whether I'm fine with it or not, you have already written my name on the application form. And as leader to boot."

"I, I was thinking of forcing you in because the matter between Reki and I would not abide us being in a team....I never thought about stealing you away from Reki's side."

Aria, who was slightly embarrassed at saying such forceful things, fell silent. I.....said nothing and watched the surroundings.

Reki.....didn't turn up. As I expected.

"There is no more time. What do we do with Reki?"

"Wait until the end. I'll text her again."

Aria said, cradling her arm and looking at the stairs.

About...4 and a half minutes left...

Looking at Assault Master Ranbyou who was handling today's photo taking and at Riko and Shirayuki who were holding the application form, I leaned over slightly and whispered,

"Aria, listen to me. It's still alright to cancel now."

"......? What?"

Aria leaned over, directing her tiny left ear at me.

".....Riko; she's dangerous. We still don't know if she's a friend or foe."

"I knew that all along. When the time comes, there will still be a final showdown between her and me."

"She may launch a sneak attack on us. She will always be around us if we form a team."

"She's not that type. Despite her appearances she's very prideful."

Aria, whose own pride reached into the heights of space, looked behind her.

"Anyway, if I do fall to a sneak attack, avenge me. That's an order. Carry it out well, okay?"

"Me defeat Riko? That's a very serious matter. And strictly speaking, if you are going to order me why do you still need me to be leader?"

"That's for the strategic purpose of Kinji taking the role of UL in battle formation. In other words, a leader in name only. The orders will still come from me."

Even if I don't hand you that task, you would still start issuing orders of your own accord anyway. But if I were to mention that, a handgun would come into play.

Well, whatever. Just take it as I'm lending you the title of leader.

"Also, the team name sounds like that of a vehicle. What does it mean?"

"Aa...that's the name of a place that I own. It's in the Dartmoor region of Devon county."

Aria casually said as my eyes widened. Owning a piece of land...but she's a highborn lady doesn't she already own land? Does she intend to wear a crown on her head as well? I stared at Aria's twin tails in surprise.

".....Well, it's empty wilderness. It's just inheritance of one of the scenes of the Holmes family's triumphs. I didn't even earn it through my own efforts." Aria averted my gaze in mild embarrassment.

I remember that name.....Baskerville. I read about it in the Inquesta textbooks. Amidst the cases solved by the original Sherlock Holmes, that name appeared. Later, the Holmes family acquired the land where that case occurred and named it Baskerville. And now, it belonged to Aria.

(As I thought, she's really a noble lady...)

I shook my head and while doing so, saw for a moment at the edge of my vision.....a flicker of white.

".....?"

In the shadow of the 2m high air-conditioning unit installed on the roof....was something that looked like a white tail.

"......!"

I.....broke into a run.

"Kinji!?"

Ignoring Aria's voice from behind, I sprinted towards the air-con unit.

....That was...

It doesn't merely look like it; it was a tail. Covered in silver fur, it was the tail of an animal.

(It likely isn't a mistake....)

Turning a corner round the air-con unit, there....was a silver wolf.

Haimaki.

And.....

His master.

A girl with short cut hair, wearing a Diviza Nero in the form of a man's suit. Her back against the side of the unit, gazing impassively at us as she stood there without a word....

"Reki....!"

Aria, who had chased after me, shouted the girl's name.

"....."

Reki, who stood below my field of vision, no longer had a bandage wrapped around her brow. I was still worried about her other wounds but from the looks of it, she was alright. Her 4 kg Dragunov sniper rifle was also carried on her shoulder in her usual manner.

"Reki-san! This is wonderful, you made it in time....! Everyone was searching really hard for you, yes? Where did you go? Really....."

Shirayuki, who was running over with Riko looked as if she was interrogating a younger child as she questioned Reki.

"....After joining up with Haimaki, I headed for Kyouto."

"Eh?"

Seeing Shirayuki's surprised expression, it seems that she did not go to the Hotogi branch shrine there. She must have found it hard to show up there after stealing their helicopter. And Haimaki must have sensed that his master was near and thus, left the shrine.

"....After which we made a reservation at the inn where we came under attack before and had a bath there." Inn.....you mean you were at Saori-san's Hachinoko? Speaking of which, baths? You still rely on traditional healing remedies and those are severe wounds. Well since you are healed now it's good.

"Even so....you knew that we were here."

I said as I remembered that Reki's cell phone had been destroyed.

"After I bought a cell phone just now, I received Aria's message immediately."

Reki replied as she lowered her head.

(Ah...so that's the case)

The moment I charged the phone that I bought a few days back, I was surprised by getting a mail from Mutou and Shiranui. It seems that Reki encountered the same situation. Generally speaking, when cell phones that are receiving messages are out of range or off, the message will be saved for a few days in the network center. And once it detects a signal again, the message will be sent anew. It's the same with new phones bought after the destruction of the previous one. It just requires the user to use the same number and not change his mail address. That's why Reki received Aria's message when she bought a new phone. A wry smile surfaced when I imagined the surrealism of Reki in an electronics shop but it's fortunate that Reki bought a new phone today. If it were tomorrow, it would be too late.

(In any case, Reki.....made it here. She would never hear the Wind again.)

...Yes. She came of her own accord. This would be the first time Reki had acted on her own free will.

......Welcome. Welcome, Reki.

"....."

Aria....

Despite rushing over immediately, was silent.

What's....with this hesitation? The deadline of the Just is drawing near. Well, despite forming a team after you had a big fight, it's understandable there would be a strain in relations.

....Can't be helped. This is where I come in.

As I wasn't in Hysteria Mode now, I don't know if I can skillfully restore the ties between both girls to their former state.

"Reki, are you fine with joining this team? Even if its arbitrarily formed by Aria."

I asked in place of Aria.

Reki....nodded her head without a word.

"Well then, hurry up and say what you want to say, Aria. After that we hold hands like friends and go get our picture taken. During the battle when you were being attacked on both sides by the Koko's you were holding hands."

Recalling the turn above the Shinkansen, I pressed Aria on....

"During that time, I only did that because it was the best thing to do."

Aria, red from embarrassment, responded as she looked up at Reki.

"But you wanted Reki in your team. Stop being so hard-hearted."

"Th...the team needed a sniper in it. That's why I included her."

Aria...this stubborn girl....My words seem to have had the opposite effect. It would be bad if I continued speaking and they end up fighting. They would still be fighting when the deadline passed. Just when I was getting my hands burnt dealing with this troublesome kid, a lifeboat appeared...

"Even though you say all these things, Aria actually likes Reki, no?"

"Come on Aria, it's fine saying it. Yesterday, I felt pity for you watching from the sides....you were so worried about Reki."

Riko and Shirayuki said from both sides.

Aria looked at the two of them, looked at me, and then looked at Reki.

Buwaaaa

With no time for me to thank Shirayuki and Riko, Aria's face turned red.

"That...that's not the case! I....I...."

So saying, Aria, who had extended a trembling arm towards Reki....took one step, a second, and walked towards Reki.

".....Reki.....!"

....She hugged her.

"Reki....Reki.....I was so worried! Why did you suddenly disappear...!"

The crying Aria and the expressionless Reki as she was being hugged.

Riko laughed as she watched those two and Shirayuki looked as if she was the elder sister kindly looking upon her two younger sisters.

G-Great.

As I thought, to get girls to make up, you need the help of girls.

"Aria-san, that time atop the Shinkansen..."

Reki, from the center of Aria's arms....

"Thank you for holding my hand."

Looking into Aria's face, they were the first words of gratitude she had spoken.

Thank you.

Until now, Reki had never said those words to anyone as far as I can remember. And hearing those common words from Reki, who was so silent that it seemed like that would never happen, it made me feel good.

Reki did change a little after that life-threatening Caravan I after all.

Hearing this overly frank gratitude Aria....whose face had been red from embarrassment for a moment, neatly turned to face Reki.

"Reki....I too am thankful. For coming that time....thank you. Let's erase this hole in our friendship. Let's now......restore diplomatic ties? Renew our relations? Err....let's be friends again!"

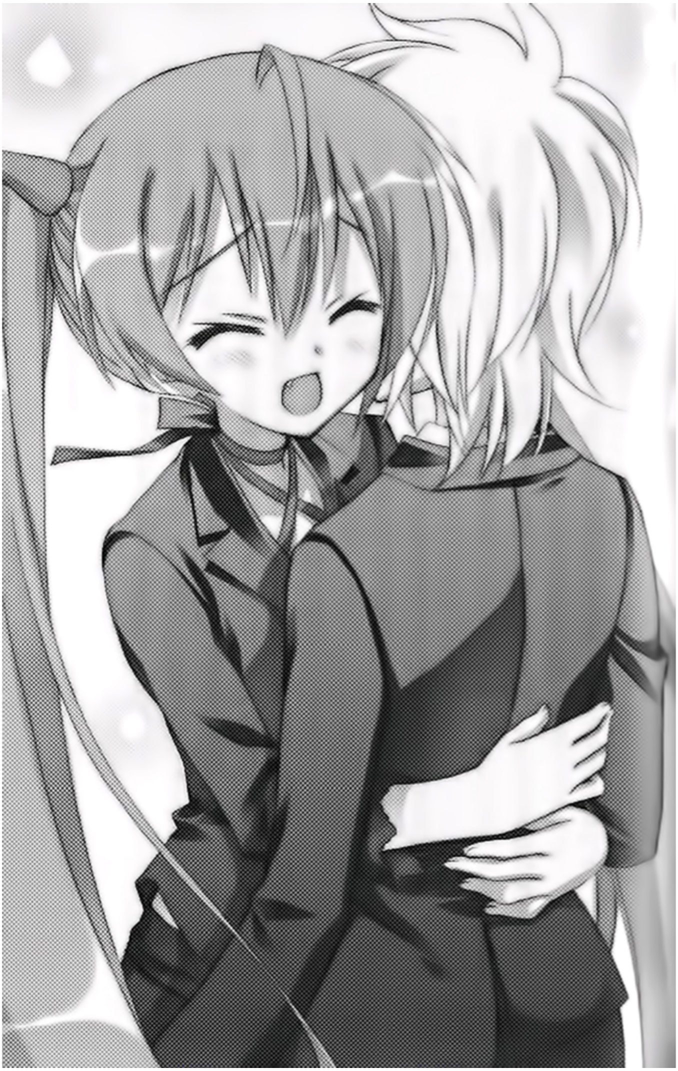
I gave a bitter laugh at such strange words for mending ties.

"Hey hey! My dear students! There is still 15 seconds to the deadline. Butei are to strictly adhere to that timing!"

A man's voice could be heard from somewhere. I looked at everyone who was dispersed. This voice....the owner was famous for only remaining audible while he himself was invisible. Master of Lezzad, Chan Wu.

"Oi little brats! Stop clinging all over each other and come here! There's around 10 seconds left! Hurry up and enter this border and have your picture taken!"

Looking in this direction, Assault Master Ranbyou brandished a camera and denoted the area marked out by vinyl tape on the floor.



"Let's go."

Aria grasped Reki's hand. Just like when they were atop the Shinkansen.

"Alright, we'd also better get going."

Pushing Shirayuki and Riko by the shoulder, I hurried towards Ranbyou and her camera. Ahead of us, Reki who seemed unsure how to react after having her real self accepted by another person, ran behind after Aria's lead. Chasing after those two, I smiled.

Here, on this rooftop of the Inquesta building was where a month ago, Reki became my partner against my will. And now....at this very same spot, we dragged Reki into our team. What an inversion it is.

"5 seconds left! Run!"

Charging towards Ranbyou, who was looking at her watch and shouting angrily, the 5 of us entered the area in one scattered block. There was no time left to neatly line up like an exemplary team. If this were a normal photo shoot, the photographer would say "Smile, look this way!"

"Alright. No smiling! Look diagonally ahead!"

This is a Butei group shot. It required us to look diagonally ahead, giving little hint of our true selves. We wore black to prevent the identification of our school from the uniform.

"Team Baskerville! Kanzaki H Aria Just!"

Aria, who was first to stand in the middle of the area, said to Ranbyou with her hands on her waist. To her right rear, Reki, in order to prevent her Dragunov from being photographed, pushed the rifle sling on her shoulder back a little to hide it. At Aria's left rear, Riko folded her arms and faced to one side, with only her eyes focused on the camera. I brushed my hair slightly such that it covered the wound left on my cheek by the Slash. To hide the taping covering my still aching fingers, I placed my hand in my pocket and entered the frame's right corner. If anyone deduced my techniques from my scars, that would leave me at a disadvantage. Last to enter the left corner was Shirayuki, who, demonstrating her fine upbringing, faced Ranbyou's camera with a slight smile.

"September 23rd 1159 hrs, Team Baskerville....Acknowledged, entered!"

Looking at her watch, Ranbyou raised the camera and pushed the shutter release at the very last minute.

And so, the strobe flashed with a sound.

Unexpectedly however, the camera that Ranbyou hurriedly raised was slanted. Although all five of us were captured in the picture, it was messily crooked to one side. Well, whatever, it's a photograph of us who always leaves things to the last minute.

At that time, I never expected that this photograph.......

.....would be the first and last one together for us, the five members of Baskerville.

After an evening shower, the sky cleared. A rose-coloured sunset engulfed Tokyo...

I took Reki and Haimaki to the western tip of the Academy Island outside the fence that prevents anyone falling into the sea. This was for the purpose of giving Haimaki that reward I promised him on that mountain during the sniper battle.

"Here...eat up. It's really troublesome peeling off all the vinyl wrapping."

In an open box by my foot were 60 fish sausages. Or in other words, I bought the entire box. On seeing that, Haimaki let out a howl, thrust his head into the box and began devouring. His white tail was waving like a propeller. He really loves fish sausages.

"...."

At Haimaki's side, Reki knelt down and gently stroked his back, as always; expressionless to a stranger's eyes...however, I had the impression that I could read Reki's expression to some small degree. This was a gentle expression of gratitude to Haimaki. I turned towards the golden sea, illuminated by the sunset and took a deep breath of the sea breeze. At this time, the wind was refreshingly cool.

Summer....was nearing its end.

"Speaking of which, did you know that even the battle positions were submitted by Aria on her own volition?"

Hearing my words, Reki raised her pretty face from her kneeling position and shook her head.

"The front is formed by Aria and me. Aria is the PM (point man), I'm the UL (Unit Leader).[9] Support will be you and Shirayuki. Riko will make up the tail. When storming a target, Aria and I will suppress with handgun bullets while you two will provide medium and long ranged attacks. Riko will be on alert for any attacks from the back and in retreat; she'll act as the rearguard, hampering any pursuers."

Reki's face was like that of a small animal as she gazed intently at me while I fired Assault terms non-stop. Seeing as she didn't say anything, it appeared that she had no objections. Well, at any rate, after being forced to become leader, I knew how to improve the team's formation. I had to combine everyone's talents and personalities.

Aria and I were experts at fighting alongside each other. Shirayuki was an almighty unit in both offense and defense. She could charge forwards with both spell and sword or stay at the rear tending to the wounded and act as a spotter for sniping. And at the rear was the genius sniper Reki, protecting Riko who would quickly spot dangers. In the event of withdrawal, although Riko could defend against the enemy's assault, however, her true skill lay in escaping; the fighting retreat being her expertise. Aria....in this accidental team of 5, was a balance. She may have no reasoning ability but she was a genius in combat matters.

(And furthermore, military formations aren't all there is to this team.)

In this team, everyone's abilities are singularly high. Including Reki, this team had two S-rank Butei which was something that was rare even amongst 3rd years. In the 2nd year, only we alone had this. Shirayuki and Riko are both A-rank so it's really a big drop in ability when my E-rank is considered. I'm truly sorry. Well, with the run-up to registration being so chaotic, the cohesiveness of the team in doubt and according to Ranbyou-sensei, "If the team is unwilling at the start, you'll have a hell of a time in the end."

I certainly pray we don't run into any cases big enough to have a hell of a time.

"How should I say this....Is this really alright? Forming a team with Aria."

Although the matter might have passed, but I'd still better be sure.

"....Yes."

Reki quietly stood up and faced me.

"Until now, I've never felt 'human emotions.' But after this experience, I've started to think. I've started to think about....Aria-san's feelings."

"Aria's feelings....?"

"When I was wounded on the mountain during the sniper attack, I was bent on following the Wind's orders; to fight to the death. And so, I allowed you to leave me. That had to be putting on a brave front. At that time, I was wavering between you and the Wind."

Putting on a brave front....even at that time, that emotion had already taken root in Reki?

"Now, I can say, at that time what I was thinking in my heart was 'I don't want to die.'"

"...."

"And the one who allowed me to embrace that thought was Kinji-san. You."

"Me....?"

"......You are a very important person to me. I did not want to leave you."

Reki, who was new to emotions....

Said honestly into my eyes without hiding her feelings.

"......."

Suddenly having a pretty girl say all this to me....

I was unable to respond and turned to face the sea.

"It's you who allowed feelings to take root in my heart. If I died I would be separated from you....from the one important to me. I don't want that."

The one important to her....she said it twice. And furthermore, they were both direct to my face. Reki sure is straight. Exactly like a sniper who fires straight and true at her target.

"This time, I've thought about Aria-san's feelings. When I took Kinji-san away from Aria-san it was the same kind of act. To her, you are a very important person."

Perhaps mirroring my actions, Reki's eyes which were looking out to sea were.....at this moment filled with a hint of loneliness.

"That's why I'll join the team.....I'll watch over you all, never pulling you all apart again. No matter what happens in the end."

Hearing Reki who was normally caught up in her own world say all this.....I had some difficulty keeping up.

"That's why, you and Aria being together is a good thing."

Having said that, Reki closed her tiny lips. And after a rare moment of hesitation,

"But this too.....is putting on a brave front....."

She murmured.

"Putting on a brave front?"

"Yes. Once more there are conflicting emotions in my heart.

I'm....facing not just the male who is simply the one Ulus need....but also the Kinji-san who allowed me to feel emotions."

Reki's red-brown eyes stared at me, as if she were gracefully expressing her own feelings and slowly said,

"I don't want to see you stolen away by Aria-san"

....That's virtually the statement of another confrontation once more and yet....

Reki's demeanor did not have the same one-sided feel as when she last fought Aria at Butei High.

"....."

"....."

For a while, the two of us were silent. The sound of crashing waves resonated in the distance.

"And conversely, I now ask if Kinji-san is fine with it; having me on the team. The Wind doesn't speak anymore. I myself don't know what to do either. My own heart follows some uncertain guidepost as it walks on, wrapped in contradiction. Without any direction from the Wind I don't even know who I am anymore...."

Perhaps it was due to the silence raising my sense of unease but Reki's behavior....resembled in some respects an attempt to cling onto something. Thinking this a little cute, my cheeks loosened imperceptibly.

"....Reki. No one ever knows who they are."

"....."

"Reki is Reki. That is enough. I'm fine with the current Reki, don't worry."

Hearing this, Reki's cheeks....slightly turned scarlet. Well, this must have been due to the red light from the setting sun.

"But....I don't know what to do from here on."

"If that's so, then just start looking from now on and it'll be fine. Just set yourself a target. And the school and team are there for that purpose."

The S-ranked honors student, Reki hearing me, the E-ranked problem child with a reputation for being utterly useless say such vague things, looked as if she was.....slightly taken aback. She resembled someone listening to the warnings of elders.

....The sound of waves reverberated in the distance....

Reki....

"You.....are just like the Wind."

She murmured to herself. And gently caressed by the wind,

"Kinji-san is a great person. Even knowing about my emptiness....he didn't change."

"No, I'm quite narrow minded. You however..."

Being able to suppress Hysteria Mode demonstrates that I'm quite a virtuous person at heart. I felt like saying so but to do that in front of Reki would be embarrassing.

Swallowing my words, I tried to cover it up.

"Ah....emptiness, emptiness has its own benefits. You just need to fill it up with many various things."

"Kinji-san..."

"That's why I'll teach you some general knowledge."

"Yes. Please teach me."

So saying, Reki's attitude gives the impression of having pure respect for me....Even if it's appropriate that I remain silent, I still felt somewhat embarrassed. In terms of Riko's games, it would be like entering "Reki's route." Although it wasn't my intention, did I just pick all the words that would win her over? This...although the character is different, it was just like my junior in Lezzad, Fuuma Hina. Mistakenly respecting the useless me, Reki sure is pitiful, I thought.

"After all, you are devoid of common knowledge. Probably the most out of all 5 Baskerville members."

For the sake of balance, I said something that would reduce her goodwill towards me. And with that...Reki's mouth seemed to twitch by millimeters. It seemed like she was pressing her lips together in an endless line but she was actually curling them.

"....."

And with a sound, she drifted over to my side and....

Pa

Lightly struck my upper arm.

This might well be an expression of anger. Communicating with Reki definitely requires observational skills. Because she hit me, I too retaliated. Lightly, gently, striking Reki on the upper arm.

And so, *pa* *pa*.

Reki hit me twice. I don't understand it but there was somehow an air of joy to the whole thing.

Which is to say that Reki also doesn't know how to express emotions.

Aa....this was bad. Even this had to be taught to her. Looking down, I saw that Haimaki had finished eating his fish sausages.....Beneath the brightening moon and the sun that had almost sunk below the sea, I turned around and prepared to return to my dorm. Like I'd just abandoned her, Reki....

"Kinji-san."

Lightly tugging my jacket from behind;

"The loyalty of the Ulus is eternal. Even if the wind no longer speaks to me, I will protect you....forever."

The happiness within her words took me aback. Seeing that kind of expression on Reki's face again, it made me feel good.

Those who do not know Reki well may not understand but I could understand that expression well enough.

It was a really thin smile. But it was cute enough to capture my heart.

There was nothing that could rival it in that....a smile, without a doubt.

That night, just after 11pm....having revised modern Japanese until pretty late.....Shirayuki got the remaining crab out of the freezer and prepared a late night tenshindon.

Perhaps it was because the food was too delicious but Riko who for some reason, had recently settled at my home took her ladle and clashed with my own for the tenshindon. Riko you little bitch...scraping even the tenshindon in my mouth out is far too much. My teeth are going to break like this. Just when I was protecting my own bowl by using Edge Catching Double Finger to stop Riko's ladle....my cell rang. It was Aria's lawyer. How many times has it been during this vacation that she had taken our testimonies over the phone? Thinking it was another one of those times; I resigned myself to leaving the remaining tenshindon and quietly walked into the living room. However, that was not the case. She was informing us that the preparations for the retrial of Aria's mother, Kanzaki Kanae-san, had been complete. Generally speaking, from now until the start of the hearing, no more new pieces of evidence could be submitted. Which in other words, means that for the time being, Aria had some time for herself. On hearing this news, I checked my watch....and took something from the wall cabinet and put it in my pocket. That was...how shall I say this....something I bought out of care for Aria. After saying "I'll be back soon" to Shirayuki who was in the bathroom, and ignoring the giggling Riko who was giggling and gulping down her tenshindon like a hyena while saying cryptically, "hu hu hu....well, well, well....? Going-some-where-hmmm? Excellent, excellent. Looks like my love-making counseling on the Shinkansen did not go to waste, hu..hu..hu," I left the house.

Recently, Aria did not rest at all due to the preparations for the trial. Add to that the conflict with Reki and she must be very stressed. And all past experiences until now demonstrate that when stressed, Aria would get into angry outbursts and things would become "Kinji's fault." In reality, Aria had recently on many occasions became nervous and would eye me in a strange manner before disappearing. That is probably a sign of danger. Thus why I needed to pacify her before the dual Governments simultaneously open fire. Nevertheless, my opponent is a girl. All along, calming the tempers of girls has never been my strong suit.

However, this time was different. I had methods taught to me by Jeanne-sensei at my disposal.

"Girls will be calmed down when they receive from men clothes, accessories or things they can wear."

And this really does work as demonstrated by Reki calming down when I bought her clothes in Osaka; this theory can be said to have withstood practical on scene scrutiny. It can thus be also applied to Aria. Even so, suddenly giving her a present would be weird. "What double meaning is there to this? Tell me! Quick, tell me now!" she would say while pointing a handgun at me. Nonetheless, today was also an occasion.

Today, September 23rd......

Despite there being only around 30 minutes left, today was Aria's birthday. Probably.

Probably, since I never heard it clearly from Aria's own lips.

However, a few months before, I heard Aria tell Shirayuki that "I'm a Virgo." This met a reply of " Eh..? That really doesn't seem so."

And thus this dangerous conversation played itself out.

A few days ago while under the influence of Hysteria mode, I recalled (apparently, when in Hysteria mode, I could recall every word I heard about something) this. To avoid the problem of being peppered full of holes in the event that I forgot Aria's birthday, I noted down in my Butei notebook that "Aria is a Virgo." And from some searching on the net, I found that Virgo ended on the 23rd of September. In other words, today. If Aria's birthday was before this date, I should be blown full of holes by now. As such, I can guess that today is her birthday.

Of course, this alone would still be insufficient basis for such a claim so I found additional backing in the unidentified 4 digits in Aria's e-mail address—0923 since it was common for users to place their birth dates at the end of their mail addresses.

Leaving the male dormitory, I leaned against the guardrail of the road and gave Aria a call. A single ring and Aria immediately answered.

".....Wh... what? Kinji."

What's with this suspicious tone.

Why? Well whatever.

"Where are you now?"

"Ah, eh? H-Here? This is the girls dorm. My room. I just returned from the lawyer's office. But...wha, what is it Kinji? Don't tell me you want to come to my room?"

Who the heck would go to Aria's room?[10]

"Then come to the conservatory below the girls' dorm."

"Eh..."

"I will....yeah, be there in around 10 minutes."

"Ha, ha, eh?"

Ha, eh? What is this?

I said warningly to Aria who spoke in that idiotic voice as if air was leaking from her throat,

"Understand?"

"Yes."

Yes?

That was the first time I heard anything akin to polite language towards me from Aria's lips.

Is Aria alright? She's being a little strange. Maybe she was simply tired. Even so however, I still must proceed. There was nothing more important after all, than preserving my own safety.

Walking through the academy island in the late night, I reached the foot of the girls' dorm....

One would know just by looking from the outside, that the interior of the conservatory was utterly dark.

Aria still hadn't arrived? I turned on the electrical switch at the side of the glass window when—

Pa *pa* *pa*... the light of fluorescent lamps bathed the interior starting from the front of the conservatory. Vegetable gardens, lily and nadeshiko zones, water lily and hibiscus zones; flowers and greenery glistened individually beneath the light. The last zone to be illuminated was the most sprawling of all; the rose zone.

There, garbed in her uniform, Aria stood idly.

She grasped at her twin tails as if rubbing them. This was a habit of hers whenever she was nervous.

Suddenly, she let out a "Ha, Waah?!" and looked around her surroundings. As if some event had not been able to be cleared up in time, numerous light bulbs lit up the decorative plants. It seemed as if the power source and ceiling lights were linked. It was just like a Christmas tree. Incidentally, the small fountain in the middle of the conservatory was linked to the power source as well. It began to spray sparkling drops of water. To top it off, the night scene of Tokyo, together with the Tokyo tower, under the harvest moon of mid-autumn could be seen through the glass walls. Somehow this over-illumination turned the place into one of much splendor.

Well, time to put Jeanne's battle plan into action for the sake of saving my life. I raised my hand in Aria's direction and walked towards her—

Aria tightly held her hands before her front, her expression one of extreme impatience.

"Why...why did you call me here?"

When I stepped forward, she took a step back.

This isn't like the Demon Butei Quadra Aria at all. She looked apprehensive.

"Aria....are you.....alright? You could still speak fine up to 'here'."

While speaking, I walked up to the front of Aria who was covered in the blooming roses....and on noticing the scar on the ground left by repair work, let out a small whistle.

"Haha....oi, this is where we fell from above back then."

Back then, I—

Had leapt from the top of the girls' dormitory together with Aria who was about to be taken back to London in a helicopter.

At that time, I had misjudged the strength of the vinyl greenhouse's roof and had fallen rather vigorously to the ground. In the process, I had battered aside several of the metal piping, wounding myself as a result.

"....Seriously...."

Aria who was looking at that spot, remembered that incident and, hit by nostalgia, her angry, upturned eyes softened. Normally angry, Aria now—

Was actually rather....cute. From the first time I met her, I had always thought so.

As if she could hear my thoughts, Aria looked up and covered her grinning mouth with her hand like she was somehow trying to hide her double canines. It appears she has a sensitivity complex regarding her own cat-like canines. That being the way it is, there's no need to hide them now. Besides, I don't dislike them. Setting her unseemly mouth in order, Aria cleared her throat—

"Eh....what do you want with me? There must be a fair reason for calling a lady out at such a late hour, yes?"

She said with the oppressive feeling that I would be blown full of holes if that wasn't the case.

I pointed at the clock hung on the trees in the center of the conservatory.

"11:45. That's quite safe."

"So; what. Is. The. Matter."

Aria. Right now, your expression is extremely weird. It is the utterly strange expression of one who is excited but is desperately trying not to let it show on her face. I should take this with my phone camera.

"Today is your birthday."

Putting on airs, I had barely said this when—

Aria, nodded frantically with her eyes wide open.

"You, yourself forgot didn't you?"

shake, shake, shake

Presently, her twin tails were violently swinging from side to side and her eyes tightly shut as she shook her head.

"You'd thought I'd ignored it then?"

Nod...shake, shake

One moment nodding then the next shaking her head, she really did believe that I had ignored her birthday totally. Such lack of faith in me.

By the way, why are you suddenly not saying anything? Just some time ago, Reki had become so talkative and now Aria had fallen silent; are you switching places or something? I really can't understand girls at all, seriously. Each and every last one of them.

"Your hand. I have a present for you."

At this, Aria raised her trembling hands together before her chest like she was collecting water.

"Err...just one hand will do."

With that, I half-heartedly grasped Aria's left hand with my right.

Waa...Aria having lost her voice and thus not making a single sound...was strange like that. How should I put it....it's as if someone had informed her beforehand of this and she had been waiting all this while....? Well even if that were the case it would still be alright. It doesn't look like she's going to reject it. I reached into the depths of my pocket—

And fished out a ring of pure silver. To prevent it from hindering Aria when she was wielding her gun, it had no gemstone. Only a plain band. This was bought from that curious, cat filled clothes shop in Osaka, Chaton b during my spare time when Reki was in the dressing room.

However....

While pulling Aria's left hand before the front of my chest, I suddenly noticed it. I noticed right now, this ring. Bought in a smaller size for the purpose of fitting Aria's hand....Yet I had not considered far enough which finger it should fit. How thoughtless of me.

"Uu....uu...mou, if you want me to accept it then hurry up and give it to me.....!"

Just like a child about to get a shot, Aria's left arm was trembling.

"Why are you so tense? It isn't as if I'm handing you a bomb. Let me see your fingers."

"F...fingers? Fingers?! W...w...w...Why!"

Her eyes having opened to the point that they were about to fly out of their sockets, I examined five of Aria's fearfully trembling fingers....

Thumb, index finger, middle finger, all.....no good. It can't fit. It would fall off the little finger. Well, ring finger then.

"Aha"

I pulled the ring from my pocket,

"Wa, wa, waaa!"

Aria cried in a fit of abnormally wild temper.

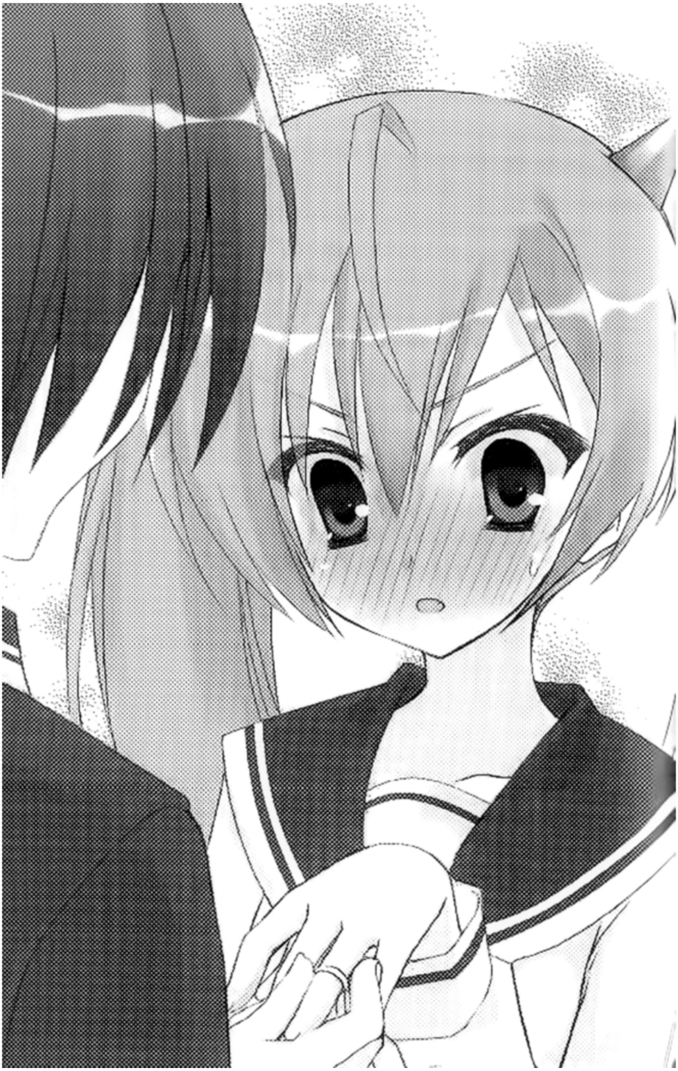
"Wa! Waaa!"

That is a ring. It is just a ring.

Why are you getting so worked up? It's not a big deal.

I say, don't make so much noise in the middle of the night. You are being a public nuisance.

"Here. Happy birthday."



And with that, I handed the ring over—

However, "! ! !," Aria was shaking so badly with fear that it was unlikely she could put it on herself. With no choice left, I took the ring finger of Aria's left hand and smoothly slid the ring into place —

Oh...it fits just nice. How fortunate.

Gyui.....

Gyuiiiiin—

At this moment, Aria's pale face was shifting through the spectrum of colours, changing from white to red. No matter how many times I see it, it never fails to amaze me; this physiology that can turn someone's face scarlet in a second. Even a chameleon would be impressed.

"I'll tell you this first, that isn't some expensive trinket."

"It's, it's al-al-alright. B-But can I accept this? Can I really accept this?"

"Just take it. And don't open fire on me so easily in future."

"—Y-Yes."

There it was once more. Aria's "yes." On the contrary, it felt weird. Up to this point, she had been responding in an over the top manner. I really don't understand her at all....

This is a lesson that a ring is an item which resounds with extreme intensity in the hearts of girls. The Aria, who can boast of a level of fieriness worthy of the Guinness Records, has been reduced to this state.

(.....Errm.......it's kind of like .....)

Aria's tantrum isn't a reaction one would have on receiving any simple accessory. Perhaps there is a further meaning to this current chain of behavior than I know?

On the night of her birthday, she got a phone call calling her to go to the conservatory. She had received a ring as a present which was put on her left ring finger. Right after, she had freely attacked me for some time.

While it was possible that the above behavior had some meaning behind it, I entirely could not see it at all. I don't want to boast but regarding basic knowledge on this sort of argument between man and woman, I know little like a child.

Due to my fear of entering Hysteria Mode, I had avoided that kind of information all my life.

Speaking of which, Kana had already warned me in the past....a lack of knowledge on such matters poses the danger that someday, actions leading to a disastrous misunderstanding when dealing with girls would result....among other things.

And so, the one facing me was the person eternally infamous for misunderstandings, Aria-san.

Any one of my previous three behaviors could have been [misunderstanding causing behavior].

However, my initial aim of ensuring my own safety has been achieved.

So it’s good, un, un.

Aria, who was nodding alone at me stammered

“Kinji….I’m….I’m very happy with th…this. But still….th..this..is too soon…wh..what does this…..mean…for us?”

Hmph…is that what she's asking.

Well, if right now, I say something like: "This is for the sake of preventing myself from being raged and shot at," I'll be made into live food for several .45 ACP bullets. As such, I--

"Butei Charter article 6: "Reflect by yourself, act by yourself". If you're a Butei, then you'll think of it yourself, right?"

Confused her.

After shaking her head up and down in one big nod, Aria looked at her open left hand, right in front of her own face--

With a feeling as if she couldn't tear her eyes away from the ring, shining on her ring finger--

Tch, tch, tch...

As if backing away from the pure, silver light, she started to shuffle back.

However, her hand was her own, so of course it followed her.

Aria, her lips shaking, walked further backwards with her shaking knees...

"Mikyaaa!"

--*Thud! Splash!*

She caught her foot on the edge of the mini fountain, and tipped over backwards.

She really fits perfectly inside the pool of that fountain, which couldn't be anything but around the size of a bathtub.

"He-hey..."

"M-Mikyaa! Kyaapu! Kyaaapu!"

Splash! SplashSplash!

Even though the water probably couldn't be anything more than 30 centimeters deep, Aria, who could not swim, started panicking in an instant--like she was drowning.

At what kind of level is your inability to swim?

No, that isn't a level at which one is able to say a simple inability to swim.

"Are you alright, Aria...?"

Aria, who was struggling, only the lower half of her fallen body sticking out, *Yank!*

I pulled her out from the fountain's pool, and...her eyes were spinning.

It didn't seem as if she had drunk any water, but her appearance was such that it appeared as if she had entered a vegetative state from the shock.

(Aahh...I can't leave her alone like this...)

I squeezed her soaked twin-tails like a wet towel, getting out the water, and then decided to carry her on my back, returning home. There's no choice. I guess I'll even let Shirayuki take care of her at our place.

Uwaah. As light as ever. Aria, that is. Isn't her body weight around 30 kilos?

"...Ex-exactly like Riko said on the Shinkansen...It's become that...Mo-more than that...!"

Aria being carried on my back, I didn't understand her words, which were like the words of someone delirious, but--

(Doing this, this time I can spend with Aria, too is...coming to an end, isn't it.)

So I thought, and I felt a loneliness that I could not begin to describe creep into my chest.

Aria...is selfish, self-centered, presumptuous- an intensely troubling girl.

But only because of that, being together with her isn't boring. Whether it was good or bad, it was always exciting.

It felt as if, to me, who had been labeled with the nickname, "Introvert," that my relationship with her had led to a balanced life. It's a different meaning from what Aria had said, but--she probably was a good partner.

Aria.

I have never said it clearly to you--

From now on, I don't think I'll say it either though. For the sake of both of us.

--I don't want you to go back. To someplace like London. Really.

But, that is my selfishness. So, I will leave it in the midst of my chest. For eternity.

Also, when next year comes, I too will transfer from this Butei High to a normal school.

April...The transfer application that I had torn up before I had chased Aria to this girls' dormitory, it's probably time to make it again. Just about time.

Continuing straight forward, Academy Island--

Carrying Aria, walking down the footpath, I thought.

Right now, I even felt that it would have been nice had Academy Island been longer.

That this night would continue forever, that it would have been alright just to walk like this, anywhere.

However, there is no night that does not dawn. There is an end to each road.

I felt as if that was something intolerable, and I tried not to think about it, but...Aria's mother's retrial is next month. I-U has been defeated, a judgement of innocence is no longer in doubt.

So, after one month--my parting with Aria. Just once.

Like that, this time was a time to steel myself, but...

Our fate, it isn't sold by a wholesaler.[11] In this, and that.

--Right, 'Hidan no Aria'-san?

Epilogue: Go for the Next!! The War Meeting -Bandire-

From then on, for a while, the days which flowed by were so peaceful it felt like a dream.

Aria, who had the tendency to skip school, went to school as normal, and it seemed that she was teaching a first year girl that was based in the Butei High system, Amico. Thanks to that, I could stretch my wings for a short while, and my transfer application to a normal school was too--alright, I had submitted it to Masters.

If it went well, my transfer would be in April of next year.

Which high school I would go to, I had not decided yet, but at the same time as my graduation to a third year, I will transfer.

Doing that...after school on the day I had taken another step towards the self who was a "normal high school student", a small incident occurred.

After staying at Informa, where shoes were forbidden, to go to my information class, opening my shoelocker to go home--

"...?"

Above my shoes, there was a letter.

The letter was inserted into a pure-white letter, and like in the movies, akin to how foreign wealthy people sealed their letters, it was sealed with red wax seal.

The name of the sender was...Jeanne d'Arc...Jeanne, huh?

"--Hey, hey!? I haven't seen anything like that except for the shoujo manga that my sister has, you know!"

When we were going home together, Logi's Muto suddenly grabbed my head from the right.

"Ahhh...just as I was wondering whether things were going well between you and Kanzaki-san, it's already this."

Shiranui, on my left, was smiling wryly with his handsome face.

"...what the hell's 'anything like that' and 'this'? It's just that Jeanne gave me a letter, right? But, she's so old fashioned. A letter in modern times. If she wants to contact me, it's fine if she just gives me a mail."

I complained, and Muto and Shiranui looked at each other--

"You know. Mails have no romance or magical fairy tales in them, so that's why it's a letter. That's a love letter. I have the patience of a samurai, and I'll keep quiet about it so *show me*."

"Kanzaki-san, Hotogi-san, Mine-san, Reki-san already, and this time it's Jeanne-san~? Tohyama-kun's matters of love deal with a complete set of beauties."

Saying that, certainty about it being a love letter coming from my left and right, they tried to snatch my letter from me.

No matter what the contents are, showing a letter from someone to somebody else is forbidden. As a human being.

Thinking that, I performed the Tohyama family's secret legacy move, the headbutt, on Muto, knocking him out, and as I was going to bring about the same result in Shiranui, he escaped from Informa.

Getting on the round-trip bus which had just arrived, I opened the letter on my seat--uu. English...no, French. And it was also written in the same flowing, cursive script.

She writes really well. Despite the fact that she can't draw.

Rather, I can't possibly read this, right? It's in French, and it's so tightly written.

As I thought that, at the end was a note in Japanese.

"I do not believe that you can read this, so I wrote it in Japanese on the back."

...Sparkle.

Then, write it in Japanese from the beginning!

「Tohyama Kinji-dono

October 1st 0:00 Southern tip of Empty Island 。Wait under the crooked windmill Go armed 。Come alone

Jeanne d'Arc」

...What is this?

The instructed time was--tomorrow, or rather, tonight.

As I was suspicious, after I got off the bus I immediately called Jeanne...

"--Tohyama? It seems you have read it."

"Jeanne, why did you use a letter? Thanks to that, we have to bury Muto."

"That is a formal letter--because, it is an invitation. You are a boy, so come properly."

Just saying that, without explaining in further detail, Jeanne hung up.

Calling her again, she did not pick up.

How should I say this...it seemed that, if she had said it properly, she thought I probably wouldn't come.

This is getting more and more suspicious.

I wasn't very interested, but pulled in by Jeanne's behaviour, I--

Because Muto...refused me, I managed to get a miniature 2 horsepower motorboat which did not need a license from Muto's sister, who, like him, was in Logi.

With that, at midnight, I crossed over from Academy Island to the southern tip of Empty Island. Just in case, with my gun.

Climbing the rusty stairs, the surface of the artificial island was--

-on top of being dark, wrapped in mist.

On the left and right of my unclear vision, windmill poles continued from west to east at regular intervals.

For some reason, it was an ominous scene.

Looking as if I was pushing through the mist, I...walked until I was below the slanted windmill. Nicknamed as slanted windmill in Butei High, which I had crashed a plane into in April.

The wreckage of that plane had been dismantled and disposed of, and the area around here had returned to its former emptiness, but...enveloping this area, this mist...somehow, makes me feel uneasy.

It felt as if this mist had not occurred naturally.

Somewhere, it seemed that I had been enveloped by the same mist before...that's right. At IU, when I had fought with Sherlock Holmes, he had, in the name of "preparatory classes", covered me with a mist like this.

"Tohyama, over here."

Turning towards the shouted voice--

At a location slightly distant from me, wearing platinum armor, Jeanne stood there.

Magic Blade - Durandal's tip pierced straight into the ground, standing there like a cane, and the hilt was clasped by two hands at the pommel, the hands placed on top of each other.

"What is it. Calling me out to a place like this at night."

Saying something that Aria had said to me a little earlier, I approached Jeanne--

Her western armor was more heavily equipped than when we had once fought her in the underground warehouse. In addition to the cuirass and greaves, she was even wearing a skirt-like fold and curved gauntlets.

On her graceful face, there was a sense of urgency. What had happened?

"--Soon, it will be 0:00."

Because from above, a familiar voice rang out, I turned my face upwards--

(...Reki?)

On the unmoving windmill's propellers, Reki, in her uniform, was sitting.

Looking closer, the Dragunov sniper rifle which was forever slung over her shoulder was cradled in front of her.

Here too--it had not reached a level of readiness for battle, but the atmosphere too was quite alert.

"What the hell is this, you two..."

As I was frowning.

--*Flash*--

As if encircling the slanted windmill in a large circle, multiple strong lights flashed into being.

Covering my eyes with my arm from the glare, I...once again, looked around me.

(...! What...they are...!)

In the mist, illuminated by the light, other than us, there were several other--figures.

Those shapes were, all, without an exception, abnormal.

--An atypical group.

Indescribable with any other words, that ominous bunch was gathered in an area around 50 meters in radius.

Like that, with everyone standing apart, it was like a group of cosplayers at a cosplay competition, but...I instinctively understood that this was not that kind of playful event. Even if it's this slow, normal me.

--This is bad. This is bad. These people are dangerous.

In my mind, the faces of IU we had fought with before flashed through one by one.

And whichever one of these it was, they were all in the category of strange people, monsters and demons. Not just people.

If I thought about it, I could be killed by the touch of a finger. Right now. Right here.

Even if I were in Hysteria Mode, I have no chance of victory. They were those kinds of people.

As if, I was being surrounded by several Kanas and Sherlocks, that kind of feeling of danger.

"--It seems that, a few days ago, **Our**
Ranban's
Koko sisters have caused quite a lot of trouble. My deepest

apologies."

Respectfully apologizing to us was a man whose eyes were so thin they were akin to slits.

On that face, a smile plastered to it, he was wearing round glasses, and he was wearing magnificent Chinese cultural clothing.

On the ground slightly distant from him--*ZZzzzz*...a black shadow wriggled.

Strange. That shadow is strange. Although there's nothing above it, even though the shadow is the only thing there, it moved. A scene out of a nightmare.

I thought that the shadow had assembled and become a human--and it rose from the ground.

"So you are the boy who, along with Lupin the 4th, defeated my father. Unbelievable."

This was different from Riko's sweet lolita...with white and black as a basis, her whole body clothed with a gothic lolita costume, the shadow became a girl with golden twin-tails. Despite the fact that it was night, her white hand was holding a frilly parasol, and on her back was something like a bat--large wings grew there.

As if showing off that those wings were real, with one flap, behind it--

"--Vn--"

-a strange sound rang out from inside another person's body.

Within the faces gathered here, it was the biggest. A giant that was 3 meters tall. Its whole body was enveloped in modern armor, it was carrying a Gatling gun, and its shoulders were even equipped with a linked rocket launcher. It was like a bipedal tank. Rather, is it a human? I don't even know that.

Next to it, body clothed in glamorous, white vestments, a nun carrying a large sword which looked like a cross and--with a pitch black hood, a large peaked cap, on her shoulders a raven which seemed to have been out of a picture, a tiny witch, and they were glaring at each other with droopy eyes and up-slanted eyes.

"We will not wage war, that of Tohyama. Still not tonight. I too am very excited because this is my first grand battle in 86 years."

For some reason, talking in a manner as if she knew about me, the person who said that was--

Wearing blue Japanese clothing with Sanskrit characters written on it, a girl even shorter than Aria.

The corners of her sharp eyes long, they seemed to be that of a Japanese person, her long hair was a dark golden colour, rather, golden brown.

The thing to rub one's eyes at was, on her head there were two...cat-like, no, fox-like ears standing up straight. Seeing it twitch, it did not seem to be just a decoration.

Others in the area were, a handsome white man wearing a trenchcoat and carrying a longsword, wearing a one-piece which seemed to be made out of a tabby-like feline's fur, a cave-man-like girl, and listening to music from earphones and swaying his body to it, an ugly-looking pierro....various types of strange people had gathered here.

And, at the edge of my vision, *Sparkle, Sparkle*--gold sand danced--

From the direction of the mist, two figures became visible.

Wearing clothes which exposed her body, one of the girls was--aah, her...!

"Hohoho. Tohyama Kinji, it's been a while."

Witch of sand, Patra.

And--wielding Scorpio, dyed navy blue, waving at me with a "Hellooo" kind of feeling...

(Kana...!)

Even Nii-san appeared...!

Long bulletproof coat, high-laced boots----that was Kana's battle outfit from when she was a Butei.

Rather, Kana...this isn't the time for "Heellooo", right? That's like a family member who has arrived to observe the class.

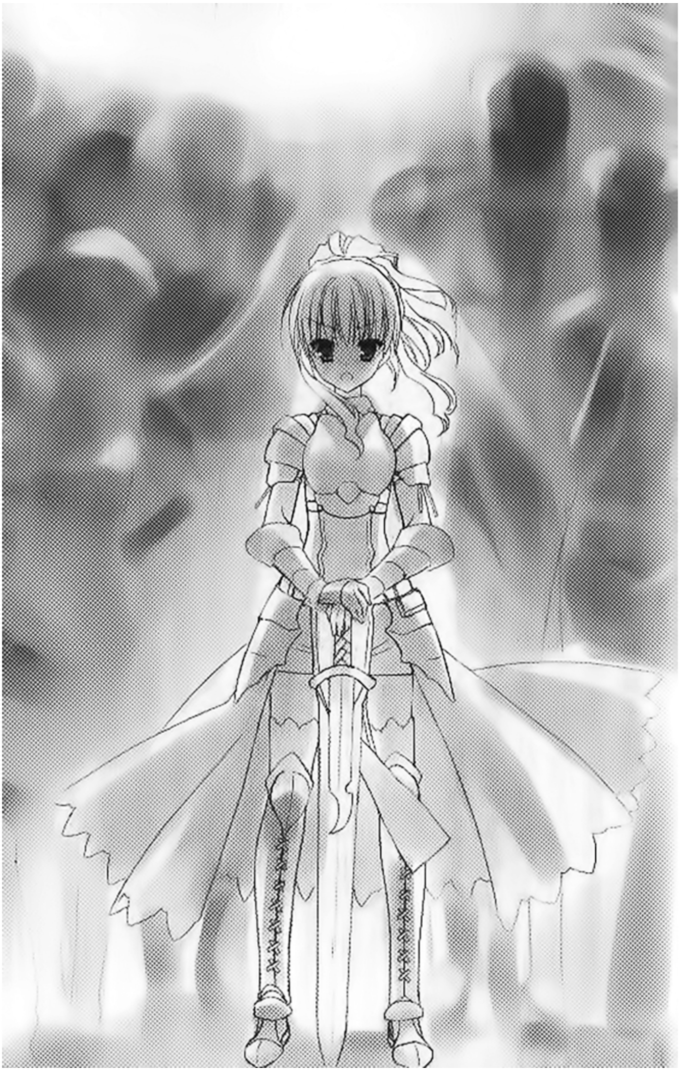
With a face which was twisted with agony, I looked around again--

Sweat oozing from my forehead, I wiped it with the back of my hand.

I just want to become a normal person.

Just the measly, boring high school student of that wish.

And being here, I too--am the same as them, being decided as an "abnormal" human being?



Whoosh--

Ice blue eyes looking around at all that were present, Jeanne...

Like a chairman, spoke out in a cold voice.

"Then, let us begin. Ambassadors of the agencies, societies, and organizations from all around the world. **Bandire**
Our council of declaration of war

--After IU's　collapse, the things we seek, taking them, fighting for them, scrambling over them, our world --Go For The Next!!!
For the sake of advancing to the next step!
!"

--Go For The Next--

Towards the people, each of them crying out, I, my eyes half-desperate, turned.

Until now, "Go", "Go"、those rushed days--

Go--For Aria's sake, run.

Go--For my companion's sake, for survival's sake, fight.

Go, Go, Go--I planned on finishing up on everything. How naive.

Apparently, as for becoming a normal male high school student--

It seems that, still, many "Go"s exist that I have to cross. Apparently.

Go For The Next!!!

Afterword

The world of "Hidan no Aria" continues to expand! This time, it's a spinoff!

How is everyone? Today, I, Akamatsu-sensei, am quite lively thanks to everyone's kindness and hospitality!

Because of everyone's efforts, Hidan no Aria's second manga volume is now on sale! Please submit helpful commentary to the phone contest as well! Finally, we're also hard at work in the production of the TV anime, announced last volume.

Furthermore! Debuting in the wildly popular manga magazine "YOUNG GANGAN", an alternate take on the Hidan no Aria world in a spinoff manga, beginning serialization this fall! Its name is...

"Hidan no Aria AA"!

The original work is by me, Akamatsu-sensei. Aria and the others will make their entrances, one by one; be sure not to miss out!

Ah...when I hear the phrase "AA", it makes me think of your cup size. I guess it's right (lol). That's an Akumatsu-ism! (<-?) As for more details...please wait!

Now then, it's time for the Hidan no Aria Q&A Segment! This time, I'll answer this question:

Q: "Butei High's store...what does it sell? What kind of place is it?" [12]

The Butei High store. A place that Kinji frequently references, saying things like "I picked up these bullets at the store".

The group of Butei High chain stores known broadly as the "Sales Division" includes the dining hall, snack counter, electronics shop, bookstore (light novels are a popular purchase!), and even the tactical supply store referenced in volume 2 from which Aria purchased the ability-sealing handcuffs. These stores are distributed all over the island! [13]

Nevertheless, when they hear the term "Butei High store", the first thing any Butei High student thinks of is the Armory. This place sells US-Japan-stationed military- and Butei corporation produced-munitions, a student-targeted Chinese-Japanese weapons depot of great repute. What Kinji makes mention of, is this shop.

That said, all models sold there are still mass-produced versions. With the exception of newly-entering first year Butei High students, no Butei High student would simply use a purchased weapon as-is.

Students rely on their fellow Amdo students for modifications to weapon weight, trigger tension, LAM (laser sights), and other such changes, altering their weapons to suit their individual styles and habits. Butei High students, after all, must trust their guns with their lives. These tiny alterations directly translate into the difference between life and death. Thus, students will constantly make these small changes throughout the school year to ensure maximum suitability. That notwithstanding, running into Armory equivalents of their trusted counterparts still fills them with nostalgia.

For a Butei High student, the words "Butei High store" - a name they will henceforth and always remember - a truly important place.

Well, having written to here, I'm just about out of room. Let's meet again in the bookstore! Until next time!

August 2010 - Akamatsu Chuugaku

Translator's Notes and References

- Lit. means that I translated it directly. If it is not present, it means that I made a few alterations for the sake of localization.
- Bolded words are in Mandarin.

1. ↑ I'm leaving the original Kurou Hougan in as it's Yoshitsune's proper title despite it meaning 9th rank general. More details see here~CE
2. ↑ Reki here carries the Chinese charactes for lei ji, meaning Petal Princess
3. ↑ The bolded-italicized words are in English in the original text.
4. ↑ Lit. Young Dragon Blade
5. ↑ Hotogi Heavenly Arts -- Scarlet Blazing God of Hotogi - Link Cut
6. ↑ The words Koko here are written in kanji as 猛妹、炮娘、狙姐 respectively. They mean fierce younger sister, cannon girl and hunting elder sister.
7. ↑ Adulterer here is written as 泥棒ネコ. Since neko means cat, it is a nice figurative imagery when coupled with Riko's cat like actions.
8. ↑ Kanji given for Bandire is 宣戦会議 Lit. Conference for the Declaration of War.
9. ↑ Point man and unit leader are based on the abbreviations PM and UL in the novel as well as the kanji.
10. ↑ Aria's room is given the kanji 危険地帯 meaning danger zone.
11. ↑ An expression meaning cheap.
12. ↑ The phrase I translate as "Butei High store" is actually "購買". This term simply means to purchase something, and thus doesn't translate at all, in this capacity, to English.
13. ↑ "Sales Division" = 購買 + 部 (department, division, etc.). You can see the relationship with the term that's being discussed.